

Fleshly Efforts to Fulfil the Promise

Genesis 16:1-16

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Introduction:

Over the last few weeks as we have been studying the portion of Genesis that speaks about Abram (or Abraham as he will later be called),

- We have seen an emphasis on the promises of God to Abram.
- They are very large promises that reach far into the future...

Back in chapter 12, we saw how God came to Abram with these promises to establish a gracious relationship with him...

- Abram, being from a typical home that was involved in idol worship, heard these promises and had believed.
- We know that he believed because the scriptures tell us that he did—and we can see evidence of it in that he obeyed God's call even though it involved leaving his homeland.
- He did that in order to seek a city whose builder and maker is God, an eternal city in the heavens.
 - It was to be a kingdom of righteousness—God's kingdom—blessed by Him.

God had told Abram that He, the LORD God, would establish this kingdom of righteousness and life through Abram's seed...

- Abram's responsibility was to believe and so to trust God to do what He had spoken.
- Establishing this great nation that would be a blessing to all the families of the earth was something only God would be able to do.

As we have followed the account of Abram given to us in God's holy word, we have seen how the LORD continues to renew the promises He made to Abram.

- There is good reason for this too...
 - God is making Abram and Sarai wait for even the first steps of the fulfillment of the promise to come about.
- In order to have a kingdom through Abram's descendants, it is necessary for him to have a least one descendant,
 - but as Abram and Sarai age, that has simply not happened.
 - So they need to be reassured that God really will do these things.

In Genesis 15, we have just seen how God very strongly affirmed His promise to Abram by making a covenant with him in the customary way that covenants were cut in those days...with one great exception...

- According to the custom, animals were divided and those entering into the covenant promised their fidelity to the promises they were making by passing between the divided parts, signifying that they would be divided in two if they did not keep their promise...
 - But instead of passing through together as was usually done, God (appearing in the symbolic form of an oven with a flame) passed between the parts alone!
 - This made it all the more clear that establishing the promised kingdom was something that God alone must accomplish!

- The message that salvation is of the LORD was driven home stronger than ever through this covenant ceremony!

Abram and Sarai had the privilege of being assured that this was God’s work and that they needed to receive it from Him rather than doing it themselves.

- But in Genesis 16, which we are taking up this week, we will see that they lost sight of that after more years had passed and still the promised child was not born.
- Please listen as I read to you from this passage—Genesis 16—beginning in vs. 1.

Genesis 16:1-16: Now Sarai, Abram’s wife, had borne him no *children*. And she had an Egyptian maidservant whose name was Hagar. ² So Sarai said to Abram, “See now, the LORD has restrained me from bearing *children*. Please, go in to my maid; perhaps I shall obtain children by her.” And Abram heeded the voice of Sarai. ³ Then Sarai, Abram’s wife, took Hagar her maid, the Egyptian, and gave her to her husband Abram to be his wife, after Abram had dwelt ten years in the land of Canaan. ⁴ So he went in to Hagar, and she conceived. And when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress became despised in her eyes. ⁵ Then Sarai said to Abram, “My wrong *be* upon you! I gave my maid into your embrace; and when she saw that she had conceived, I became despised in her eyes. The LORD judge between you and me.” ⁶ So Abram said to Sarai, “Indeed your maid *is* in your hand; do to her as you please.” And when Sarai dealt harshly with her, she fled from her presence. ⁷ Now the Angel of the LORD found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, by the spring on the way to Shur. ⁸ And He said, “Hagar, Sarai’s maid,

where have you come from, and where are you going?” She said, “I am fleeing from the presence of my mistress Sarai.” ⁹ The Angel of the LORD said to her, “Return to your mistress, and submit yourself under her hand.” ¹⁰ Then the Angel of the LORD said to her, “I will multiply your descendants exceedingly, so that they shall not be counted for multitude.” ¹¹ And the Angel of the LORD said to her: “Behold, you *are* with child, and you shall bear a son. You shall call his name Ishmael, because the LORD has heard your affliction. ¹² He shall be a wild man; his hand *shall be* against every man, and every man’s hand against him. And he shall dwell in the presence of all his brethren.” ¹³ Then she called the name of the LORD who spoke to her, You-Are-the-God-Who-Sees; for she said, “Have I also here seen Him who sees me?” ¹⁴ Therefore the well was called Beer Lahai Roi; observe, *it is* between Kadesh and Bered. ¹⁵ So Hagar bore Abram a son; and Abram named his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. ¹⁶ Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram.

May the LORD bless the reading of His holy Word.

Abram and Sarai were certainly having to learn patience as we come to chapter 16.

- In verse 1, the problem is described...**Genesis 16:1: Now Sarai, Abram’s wife, had borne him no *children*.**
- Many more years had gone by.
- Abram had now reached the ripe old age of 86 and Sarai was past the age of childbearing at 75...
- And still there is no son!

In this passage we see what happened when, instead of waiting patiently for God to act, Abram and Sarai took matters into their own hands and resorted to their own wisdom.

- In looking at this, I want to show you how those who do this often launch out with great confidence at first, supposing that they have found the way forward,
 - but how their own fleshly way leads only to frustration and trouble...
 - And how the LORD here reveals to us simple truth about Himself that they should have known all along—and truth that if remembered, can keep us from falling into the same error of impatient rushing ahead of the LORD.

To put it more succinctly, we are going to learn today why we should wait on the LORD to fulfil His promises instead of rushing ahead.

- So for our first point, I want you to see that...

I. When we rush ahead in our own wisdom, we often feel quite good about it.

- It is very deceptive—very dangerous...
- A. We move forward supposing that we are doing something good.
 - That is what Sarai does!
 - 1. Sarai has a great idea to solve the problem of her barrenness!
 - a. She resorts to the custom of the day—a custom that barren women often resorted to in her day!
 - You can see it described in verses 1-2...
 - She will give Abram her maidservant, Hagar, as a wife, and Abram can have children for Sarai through her!
 - Let me read it to you again—verses 1-2: **Now Sarai, Abram’s wife, had borne him no children. And she had an Egyptian maidservant whose name was Hagar. 2 So Sarai said to Abram, “See now, the LORD has restrained me from bearing children. Please, go in to my maid; perhaps I shall obtain children by her.” And Abram heeded the voice of Sarai.**
 - It seemed to be the perfect solution!
 - The LORD had said the child of promise would come from Abram’s body, and in this way, that would be accomplished...
 - Even though Sarai was barren, they could have this child by proxy.
 - Why didn’t they think of this before?
 - This was very much something that was in vogue!
 - b. In devising this way of proceeding, Sarai is obviously thinking about the promise which she desires greatly.
 - We have no reason at all to question her motives.
 - She was a godly woman—she had obeyed her husband, leaving their homeland and wandering about in Canaan because she too believed the promise.
 - Even when she speaks about this plan, she speaks about the Lord.
 - We are told in the New Testament that she was both a godly and a patient woman.
 - In a way, it was a sacrifice for her to let her husband have another woman, but she knew how important it was for them to have a son...
 - So it was a sacrifice she was willing to make!

- Her motives may have been right, but that does not make her plan right.
2. Rushing ahead like this is a common sin among God’s people.
 - a. In our day, people sometimes resort to ways of the flesh to build the church.
 - Jesus has told us that He will build His church—and that people from all nations will come to His salvation...
 - This is a great promise that we have today in the church...
 - And we should yearn to see it happen...
 - We should do things we have been called to do to make it happen like diligent prayer, faithful preaching, and godly living and witness to the people around us...
 - But sometimes we do not get the results we want and that is when we resort to our own fleshly schemes...
 - We neglect the things we ought to do (diligent prayer and faithful preaching) and we develop schemes.
 - In the middle ages, when the church gained the support of political power, there was an effort to advance the kingdom by military force...
 - a region would be conquered and then the defeated people would be forced to baptism and church membership.
 - There is no doubt that there were true conversions that occurred, but the method was not right.
 - In our day, many churches have resorted to marketing to advance the kingdom...
 - I don’t mean using the internet or other media to send out invitations or to publish the gospel,
 - but marketing in the sense of looking at unbelievers as consumers and then shaping the church to attract them—
 - taking out offensive doctrine from the sermons, altering the music to suit their tastes, substituting dialogue or drama in place of preaching—that sort of thing...
 - Such changes are often promoted with great enthusiasm and the best of intentions!
 - “This is how we can make the church grow!”
 - b. In a similar way, we rush ahead on an individual basis...
 - A young man wants to find a girlfriend...
 - but instead of waiting to find a godly young woman, he heads into a relationship with an unbeliever—or against the counsel of his parents...
 - He is not content to wait on the Lord...but rushes ahead.
 - c. The same thing is often done with purchases...

- Those who do not want to wait for God to provide for a vacation will take out a loan and bind themselves so that they cannot tithe or help the needy, or so that they become needy when something unexpected occurs.

TRANS> You get the idea—impatience causes us to go against the will of God to get things that we do not think He has provided to us as soon as He should have!

B. We do not see the sin in what we are doing either—we think it is okay.

- But often the sin involves direct violation God’s commandments!
1. Look at the sin of Sarai and Abram here!
 - a. They violate the sacred institution of marriage!
 - God appointed that in marriage two (not three) become one!
 - To trample on what He instituted, even when it is with good intentions as Sarai and Abram do here, is to show contempt for His ordinances.
 - It is to show disrespect toward His authority who alone can determine what marriage is.
 - A government can just as effectively decree that the sun will stand still tomorrow as that three people can form a marriage...
 - or that two woman can or two men can marry...
 - In trying to create such unions, we show contempt for our Creator.
 - That is one of their sins in this rash action...
 - b. A second sin is that they forsake patient waiting on God in prayer and move ahead without consulting Him.
 - They might have argued that they had been waiting for the child of promise for ten years—that they had been very patient...
 - and I suppose it is true enough—they had been patient...
 - But does that give them the right to now be impatient and stop waiting on God?
 - Does that give them an excuse to leave off praying and to move forward in way that He has not appointed without consulting Him?
 - That is a second way they sinned...
 - c. And a third that is related to this is that they acted as if God does not see or hear!
 - They act as if He is not aware that they are getting on in years and as if He does not hear their prayers—
 - as if He was busy with some great project and had forgotten about them and didn’t have a plan in mind for them...
 - It is a great sin to think of God in such a callous and improper way!
 - He is the God who knows all things—who has a plan—who knows and cares deeply for us—who is near to us for whatever reason we may call upon Him...and we insult Him when we think of Him as one who is indifferent or detached.

2. We also sin when we resort to our own wisdom...

- a. Those who resort to marketing techniques for evangelism also break clear commandments of God...
 - He commands us not to add or take away from the worship that He has appointed for us in His Word...but that is just what they do.
 - Instead of singing psalms with the plain voice, they bring in all kinds of instruments and uninspired songs...
 - in some cases the happy-clappy stuff, and in others the high church traditional stuff of bowing to saints and adding ceremonies.
 - But all this is an abomination to the LORD!
- b. You can see in a similar way how the young person who wants to marry throws patience to the wind...
 - breaking the command to marry only in the Lord...
 - or breaking the command to submit to parents by entering into a relationship of which they do not approve...
 - or engaging in sexual immorality before marriage—all because of an unwillingness to wait for God to give them a spouse.

TRANS> We must not minimise such sins!

- God is a holy God and He does not approve of them.
 - He is a holy judge and a consuming fire and we dare not regard what He commands as irrelevant or unimportant!
 - It is our duty to do His will!
 - But when we grow impatient, we ignore the sin involved in these actions...we are oblivious to those sins...and we move forward with our own plans...
 - We deceive ourselves!
- C. At first things seem to go quite well, so that makes our deception even greater!
- There is fruit...
1. For Sarai and Abram, a child is conceived by Hagar!
 - Their fleshly efforts seem to have been blessed!
 - **Genesis 16:2-3 says: Then Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar her maid, the Egyptian, and gave her to her husband Abram to be his wife, after Abram had dwelt ten years in the land of Canaan. So he went in to Hagar, and she conceived.**
 - Things seem to be moving along just as planned!
 - Surely they were praising the LORD!
 2. And for those wanting to move the church along—there is success!
 - Lots more people are coming to church!
 - The congregation is looking at getting new building.
 - The changes in worship have been a great success and the pastor is being asked to speak at conferences to tell everyone how he has done it.
 - He is very careful to give the glory to God as he explains how God led them to update their worship.

- Every day, he gives thanks for what God is doing!
- 3. And the young couple—well yes—they are as happy as they can be!
 - Things are working out beautifully for them...
- 4. And the family that went into debt for the vacation—well what a beautiful time they are having—they are sure that God is pleased—He knows that they needed some time to get away...and it is so nice to not be constrained by money while they are on this trip.
 - They are thanking God that the bank allowed them to take out such a large loan.

TRANS> So in every case—when we rush ahead, we feel sure that we have made a great decision—it is clear (in our own minds) that the Lord is blessing us.

II. But soon we experience trouble and confusion

A. We find ourselves in the midst of a grand mess that we have made.

1. The peace and order of Abram's house is disrupted
 - a. It is clear that Abram is a lover of peace—
 - He consistently does what he can to prevent quarrels...
 - Remember how he went out of his way to stop the quarrelling between his own and his nephew's herdsman?
 - It is clear that there was a lot of unity and peace in his home.
 - b. But now, because of his ungodly taking of Hagar, the house that he and Sarai were looking to build up by this action is being divided and torn!
 - 1) First, there is division between Hagar and Sarai
 - The second part of verse 4 informs us that when Hagar **saw that she had conceived, her mistress became despised in her eyes.**
 - Not so much that she was malicious toward her but that she felt superior to her—she was now the mother of Abram's child!
 - She had done what Sarai could not do!
 - Sarai felt this contempt in Hagar very deeply.
 - It was a great offense to her.
 - Apparently, Abram took no notice of this state of affairs and that infuriated Sarai all the more...
 - Either that, or she is just so frustrated that she unleashes on him.
 - In any case, now...
 - 2) There is division between Abram and Sarai
 - It is the first time we have seen such division between them!
 - They have been very united, but now that they have looked to bring forth a child by fleshly methods,
 - See how Sarai lashes out at her husband...v. 5: **Then Sarai said to Abram, "My wrong be upon you! I gave my maid into your**

embrace; and when she saw that she had conceived, I became despised in her eyes. The LORD judge between you and me.”

- There is a sense in which Sarai is right to blame him—
 - Yes, it was her idea, but he went along with it—and he was responsible for what was done in his home...
 - He bears the blame...
 - Men, as the head of your home, you are responsible—it makes no difference if it was your wife’s idea...
 - You are still responsible and you can’t pass the blame off on her—only wimps do that.
- But what a bitter fruit this is—that this couple who had dwelt in peace all these years is now divided and quarrelsome.
2. Similar results often occur in the examples we have been using...
- a. The church using fleshly means to grow, begins to realise they have a lot of unbelievers in their midst—and problems start to grow out of that.
 - It was great to have all the new people and all the excitement, but now the people are complaining—they are all wanting different things...
 - 1) Even though the pastor stopped mentioning hell a long time ago when he made some of the changes,
 - some of the members are offended because the pastor said that coming to Jesus is the only way to be saved...
 - What about good people like Ghandi?
 - Is the pastor saying that Ghandi will not be in heaven?
 - 2) And speaking of Hindus,
 - Someone on the worship team wanted to read a beautiful Hindu prayer for world healing and promote a trip to India to see a guru.
 - But some of the old members that are more traditional are against it.
 - b. And the couple who rushed into a relationship begins to have division.
 - They were careless and she got pregnant—but she does not want to keep the child because she wants to finish her training programme and she is not ready to take care of a child...
 - She is telling him that he has no right over her body...

TRANS> That is some of the ways that division comes when we try to build unity in fleshly ways...

B. At this point we have an option...either repent or try to handle it our own way.

- 1. We ought to repent of course!
 - a. Abram should have taken initiative right here—
 - Not to rebuke Sarai and remind her that it was her own stupid idea, and not to lash out at Hagar for her pride, but to repent...

- To say to these ladies,
 - “This is all my fault. I should not have allowed this in my home and now we are all suffering on account of it. I have sinned against God. Please forgive me. I am going to ask God to forgive me and we have to try to make the best of this situation. Let’s ask the Lord to help us.”
 - And then he could have encouraged them some time later (after prayer and fasting) to get along with God’s help...
 - “By God’s grace, we have enjoyed great peace in our home. Do you not both want that now? Sarai, we put Hagar up to this and we need to show kindness to her, and Hagar, you are still Sarai’s maid and if you are haughty, we will all be miserable in this house. Please, it is my wrong that got us into this mess, but for my sake and for the glory of the LORD, let us strive for peace.”
- b. Repentance is always what we ought to do when we have acted in the flesh.
- 1) The compromising church needs to repent and start preaching the whole counsel of God...
 - The elders need to come before the congregation and acknowledge that they have led them astray—that they were wrong in setting aside the word of God to get more people...
 - And that by God’s grace, they are going to lead the church back to preaching the whole counsel of God and to biblical worship.
 - Many people will leave, but God will bless them.
 - 2) And the couple—the fellow will need to confess to his girlfriend that he was wrong to get involved with her—
 - that it is his fault that they are having all this trouble and he should ask her to forgive him and plead with her to come to the LORD.
 - And if she will not and if she insists on aborting to child, he will have to commit that all to the LORD and break up with her.
 - He will also need to ask forgiveness of his parents and the other members of the church for what he has done, and of course he will have to reconcile with God.
- That is what ought to be done when we realise what we have done...
2. But often we try to handle the situation ourselves
- a. Sadly, that is what Abram does—
 - 1) Instead of repenting, and following the LORD, he tries to appease Sarai by telling her that Hagar is in her hands...
 - she can do whatever it takes to humble her proud maid, **v. 6: So Abram said to Sarai, “Indeed your maid is in your hand; do to her as you please.”**

- Instead of taking responsibility, he defers—he shakes off his responsibility and makes this lame effort to distance himself from the problem.
- 2) By not repenting, he takes a bad problem and makes it worse.
- The result is that the division between Hagar and Sarai is exacerbated so that Hagar runs away:
 - Look at the second half of v. 6: **And when Sarai dealt harshly with her, she fled from her presence.**
- b. Trying to fix it by our own efforts only makes matters worse...
- 1) You can only imagine what would happen in the church if the leaders try to reach some middle position...
- They will let the Hindu prayer be read, as long as it is clearly introduced as a prayer from another faith;
 - and the pastor will try to be careful about making it sound like people from other faiths are wrong, but he will still say that everyone will benefit by coming to Jesus.
 - The division between believer and unbeliever will just continue to deepen in a church like that.
 - The path of repentance will bring about division too,
 - but at least the church will then be bearing the reproach of Christ instead of the reproach of their own stupidity.
 - At least they will be purified rather than further corrupted!
- 2) Let me urge you that as soon as you see the wrong that you have done—
- Often you do not see it until God’s hand of chastisement begins to be felt—but as soon as you see it—
 - humble yourself and repent!
 - The sooner the better!