

IT SEEMED LIKE A GOOD IDEA AT THE TIME

By Steve Zeisler

I am convinced as I observe the Christian life of myself and of those I know that we have to realistically and honestly talk about the times of dryness, the long periods when there is no excitement. During these times, there are no dramatic battles to win or visions of fire and smoke, and God does not seem to be speaking. Although we are trusting him, few results of that trust are apparent.

In Genesis 16, Abram came to one of these periods in his life. After the early years of following the Lord, moving to Canaan, making wise choices, resisting temptation, and leading in worship, he had now settled in and time was passing. He struggled to believe God in this rough period—a dry period lacking adventures of faith. As we will see, he failed badly at a critical point in trying to assess the will of God.

Chapter 16 is in some ways a repeat of the tension we found in the previous chapter. In Gen.15, Abram stood under the night sky, heard the voice of God and wrestled with Him over its implications. The Lord God ministered to Abram in a powerful way, causing the frightful vision of fire and smoke passing between divided animals. This was a high point in Abram's life, when God took Abram's struggle and replaced it with awe and encouragement.

Now another person at the heart of this story is going to ask essentially the same question. Sarai, Abram's wife, had heard these promises and knew of the child to come. Since she was obviously intimately concerned with the outcome of these events, she asked the same question and wrestled with the same issues. The story now likes off from her point of view. Look at Gen.16:1-6:

Now Sarai, Abram's wife had borne him no children, and she had an Egyptian maid whose name was Hagar. So Sarai said to Abram, "Now behold, the Lord has prevented me from bearing children. Please go in to my maid; perhaps I shall obtain children through her." And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai. And after Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Abram's wife Sarai took Hagar the Egyptian, her maid, and gave her to her husband Abram as his wife. And he went in to Hagar, and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress was despised in her sight. And Sarai said to Abram, "May the wrong done me be upon you. I gave my maid into your arms; but when she saw that she had conceived, I was despised in her sight. May the Lord judge between you and me." But Abram said to Sarai, "Behold, your maid is in your power, do to her what is good in your sight." So Sarai treated her harshly, and she fled from her presence.

Sarai had struggled a long time. She and Abram had been married since before they left Ur. They had lived together for many years without having any children. In some ways, infertility was more difficult for Sarai than for Abram, he wanted to see his name carried on through the heirs of his house and the family God had promised him, but Sarai lived with the personal heartache of wanting a child of her own. She lived in a culture where the bearing of children was particularly important for women. In Gen.16 Abram spoke to God about an heir and thought into the future of a family line and a nation to come. When Sarai began to appeal to Abram in her struggle with this issue, she talked about a baby. Thus, she devised, "Maybe through this other woman, I will be allowed by God to obtain children."

When she spoke with her husband, she did what was proper. He was a priest in his home and the spiritual leader of his people. Thus, Sarai appropriately appealed to her husband with her spiritual problem and made an essentially selfless suggestion. She was willing for another woman to become a second wife in the family if by that means they might have children. It was common in the culture of the day for a great and rich man like Abram

to have more than one wife. It was not dishonorable or seen to be sinful, and it was not uncommon for a surrogate to bear children for one who was infertile. Jacob, the third of the patriarchs, we might note, had children by more than one woman and all of his sons became heads of tribal families.

Sarai cried out in her heartache to Abram. She laid her burden before him and made what seemed like an excellent suggestion under the circumstances. She made it to the right person, not just because he was her husband but because he was Abram, the man who spoke directly with God. Yet he failed her incredibly at the point of her greatest need.

At the end of Gen.16:2, we are told that Abram listened to the voice of Sarai his wife, which recalls for us the moment in Genesis 3 when Adam listened to the voice of his wife. Instead of taking leadership in spiritual matters from the Lord God, Abram took leadership from another human being. Just as Adam listened to his wife's voice and did the wrong thing, Abram listened to the voice of Sarai and did what he should not have done.

Please note that I am not highlighting the fact that she was a woman or his wife. The problem was listening to another human being—someone who had information and ideas about what should be done concerning the things of God—and never asking God whether it was right or not. In this particular instance, the Lord God had told Abram more than once, "I will act on your behalf to give you a child."

Abram certainly knew that in this area of his life God had insisted upon having control. But now when a human being made an offer for him to act independently of God, he listened to that voice and would face the tragic results. It was not Sarai's fault. She made a selfless and reasonable suggestion. It was Abram's fault, as the spiritual leader in his home, for not discovering if this was in fact what God wanted.

Let us look at the end of the story and see what happens to Hagar at the birth of her son and his naming. Read the rest of Gen.16 starting in verse 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. And he said, "Hagar, Sarai's maid, where have you come from and where are you going?" And she said, "I am fleeing from the presence of my mistress Sarai." Then the angel of the Lord said to her, "Return to your mistress, and submit yourself to her authority:" Moreover, the angel of the Lord said to her, "I will greatly multiply your descendants so that they shall be too many to count." The angel of the Lord said to her further, "Behold, you are with child, And you shall bear a son; And you shall call his name Ishmael, Because the Lord has given heed to your affliction. And he will be a wild donkey of a man, His hand will be against everyone, And everyone's hand will be against him; And he will live to the east of all his brothers."

Then she called the name of the Lord who spoke to her, "Thou art a God who sees;" for she said, "Have I even remained alive here after seeing Him?" Therefore the well was called Beer-lahai-roi; behold, it is between Kadesh and Bered.

So Hagar bore Abram a son; and Abram called the name of his son, who Hagar bore, Ishmael. And Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to him.

We can learn from Gen.16 on two levels. The New Testament uses it on one level—as an allegory or a symbolic representation of spiritual issues. The other level looks at the family drama—tensions in the home similar to the tensions we face. I think it will be useful to look at both levels of meaning.

First, I would like to consider what we have read in light of how the apostle Paul uses it in Galatians 4 and other places. The apostle saw an allegory about life magnificently presented in the choice Abram made, facing two women through whom he might have a child. Paul noted that if we read the Bible carefully we will see there is always a choice between two opportunities for living life as a spiritual person with a concern for righteous behavior.

Although the choices appear to be similar, the two opportunities could not be more different in substance. In one case, we are offered an opportunity to radically trust God with what seems inconceivable, given our own inadequacies, history, and memories. As we doggedly refuse to trust anything else, we insist on believing the Lord God and expect him to be a life giver for us. The second option is to replace God with our efforts or some system we have created with our own minds and hands. Recall the first pronouncement of the Decalogue, the Ten Commandments. It says, "Thou shalt have no other gods before Me." The most awful and despicable choice a man or a woman can make is to replace God, telling him we can do what he has said he would do and do it better and more quickly. By making this choice, we set him aside and act as if we were God ourselves.

One of the most striking things to happen to people who come from a humanist background who read the New Testament is the discovery that the Bible is antagonistic towards religion. They expect religion to be highlighted and revered, but they find that it is often treated with contempt. Jesus' harshest words fell not on the character of prostitutes, thieves and tax collectors but on that of the religious leaders—the Sadducees, Pharisees, and scribes. The Bible speaks against religion based on worship created by the hands and thinking of human beings.

At this point, Abram had the opportunity to make the choice to do what he knew God wanted done because he trusted God to know how best to proceed. He could choose either to make the promise happen himself or to continue to wait for God, seeking his approval, understanding, and direction. He had the opportunity to either replace God or to follow him. This is why his decision was such a great tragedy.

The promise had been made that Abram would have a son from his own body. The offer of Hagar did not necessarily contradict that promise. He and Sarai had waited ten years in Canaan and years before that. The weariness of waiting produced skepticism and spiritual dryness. Maybe this was the time for them to do something about the promise. The idea had a sensible ring to it, but essentially Abram was replacing God's with his own wisdom. He never asked the Lord in humility about the plan advanced by Sarai. He became god for himself.

C.S. Lewis wrote in "Mere Christianity:" According to Christian teachers, the essential vice, the utmost evil, is Pride. Unchastity, anger, greed, drunkenness, and all that, are mere flea bites in comparison; it was through Pride that the devil became the devil: Pride leads to every other vice: it is the complete anti-God state of mind." Although Abram may not have felt proud when he acted, he was saying in his heart, "I know better than God." He accepted the offer of his wife, the thinking of another human being, without checking on the plan of God. When he made this tragic choice, his own character was demoralized in front of everyone. The world has lived with the outcome ever since. The antagonism of the Middle East today is a direct result of Abram's tragic choice to replace God in his life.

The key problem, the great difficulty for us as Christians, is that the two offers look similar enough to easily mistake them. It was not a choice between a woman and an army. It was a choice between two women who would each have sons. And the sons would each found families of twelve tribes. There is so much similarity that we must choose faith with humility time after time recognizing that we too can easily replace God with our own efforts.

Abram made a tragic choice in a period of dryness—when visions had ceased and there were no wars to fight. In his weariness, Abram listened to the voice of human counsel instead of seeking the Lord, and made an awful choice that diminished him as a man and led to much human suffering.

The second level of meaning I would like to consider is the dynamic of this marriage and family. The key issue is weariness, the spiritual dryness reflected in a long wait for God to do what he said he would do. It is important to note that Abram failed not in the public arena but in his home, the place where he had the most intimate, long-standing relationships.

I think we will all find this to be rue. Whether you are single or married, in spiritually dry periods you may be able to lead a great Bible study or witness in a powerful way to some person passing through your life or sing on Sunday morning with full voice. If you are called on to fight a battle, to witness to a king, or to resist a powerful

temptation, you may be able to do all these things. But what you are apt to find, as Abram did, is that in the nitty gritty of daily life where people know you, see you consistently, and understand you best you will be most vulnerable. For Abram, this place was in his marriage.

I have talked to too many people and lived too long in my own home to not see how men especially can be weak and inadequate at home even though they can succeed in the business world, or have ministries of great stature. Because the difficulties we face at home are by far the most intransigent, success often comes very slowly. We cannot escape the tensions of life in a family—the heartache, the memories, the incorrect ways of treating each other that have become habit over the years. And these are the hardest to change.

Sarai had good reason to think Abram was fallible when it came to following God, and to suggest a new course for them. Do you remember when they went to Egypt the first time (Gen. 12:10-19)? Abram abandoned her to Pharaoh's harem. Fearing for his own life, he did not provide security and understanding of her situation. It was probably in Egypt that Hagar was gathered into the family. Abram's leadership, his faith in God, did not seem to be alleviating any of Sarai's frustration and hurt. Therefore, in the midst of the turmoil and tension, she went to him with a plan: "Maybe I can have a baby by this woman."

When the Scripture says Abram listened to the voice of his wife, I think there is a note of tenderness included. Abram loved his wife and knew that she had wanted to have a child for years. She was heartsick and ashamed of her infertility. In response to his wife's sorrow and need, Abram finally gave in. He should have taken his wife in his arms and presented her before the Lord to ask him to meet her needs and to help them both to understand what God had promised. He should have promised security and leadership when she was living with her heartache and sickness of spirit, but he did not.

Though he might have done well if there had been an altar to build, a battle to fight, or public praise of God to offer, in the tension and the need of his own home Abram caved in. The man of God became the mouse of God. He embraced the slave woman Hagar, and his wife came to him in a rage later crying, "This woman wants to be first wife in the family. Now that she is pregnant, she despises and torments me. What I thought would bring happiness has become a threat to me." With anger in her voice, she said, "The Lord judge between you and me. It is your fault!" And she was right; it was his fault. You cannot read this story without seeing Abram as the responsible party. Instead of meeting her need for security, understanding, love, and a touch of God in her life, he had merely increased the threat to her.

Then he caved in again. When she was furious with Hagar, he said, "Okay, do what you want. It is up to you." He acquiesced and became smaller and less significant. He did not lead. He did not pray. He did not care. The great friend of God, the great example of faith for everyone, became a mouse. And the tragedy continued.

Each of these three lived painful lives because of their sin. Sarai was desperate and became more so as the circumstances went forward. Hagar was arrogant, pitiless and unconcerned for the heart sickness of Sarai. She ridiculed and despised her. Abram, the most tragic of all, became acquiescent, weak and distant. The man who could challenge kings and pharaohs and lead armies became a nobody because he was unable to trust God and lead in his home.

Having made this observation about Abram, I would like to suggest that family life is the most difficult arena of all in which to be godly. People who can build monuments to the Lord, preach to thousands, raise money, travel over seas to bring help to the needy, and feed the flock of God with spiritual food have no guarantee of success in their own homes when facing the demanding, uncertain, long term difficulties found in most homes. I have been an elder in this church for some years, and have been involved in making some hard decisions concerning property, ministry, people, and teaching. But I am convinced that none of the decisions I have had to make as an elder compare to the difficult decisions and judgment calls I have to make at home.

We have a family room in our house that has a favorite chair, the most desired seat in the house. Our three children wage an unending battle over who will get to sit in this favorite chair. I have tried everything imaginable to create some sort of order, and the latest attempt consists of this: Sarah, the oldest, gets to sit in the chair on all of

the even numbered days of the month; Jeff gets to use it on all of the odd days; and David gets to sit in it on all the days divisible by three. The result is that in any month numbering thirty days, everybody gets to sit in the chair for ten days. Recognizing there are five months with 31 days, we declared the 31st of any month to be the sabbath when nobody gets to use it. I thought I had solved the issue until I realized that February has 28 days. Now I have to figure out how to balance this new unforeseen tension.

Family life is hard because of the decisions that need to be made, the sensitivities, the expression of love, the need for understanding, and the need for time spent. I do not feel as weak anywhere else in my life as I do when I contemplate my role as a husband and father. I do not sense any deeper need for the Lord anywhere else than I do there.

I think Abram, as great a man as he was, displayed in this setting his struggle to minister to his wife, his struggle to understand what was really going on inside her, and his struggle as leader in his home to take her before the Lord and let the Spirit of God calm her fears. When he went along with the alternative to trust in God, things only grew worse and worse.

The last half of this chapter makes a statement about the redemptive nature of our God. Hagar thought she could become Abram's favored wife because of her pregnancy. But there would be no other first wife in Abram's life. Sarai was intended by God to have the honor of being mother to the son who would inherit the promises. When Hagar hoped to take the place of the first wife, she probably wanted to wedge her way into the relationship Abram and Sarai had with God. But she would never be permitted to do so. Even so, the Lord loved her and reached out to her.

The angel of the Lord who came to meet Hagar by the well is the same figure to speak to Abram and Sarai later. I am convinced that this is Jesus before his incarnation, taking a human shape to walk on the earth and speak to people. It was Jesus who came to find Hagar, not some emissary or secondary character. The Lord himself came to meet her needs and ministered to her in the area of her sinfulness—her arrogance. He said, "Return and submit. Your problem is that you are committed to your own interests, your own place and your own pride. You will never experience life until you deal with this." He also promised that a multitude would descend from her son as well. She was struck with the loving oversight of God ("Thou art a God who sees.") even though she could not have the position or status she had grasped for.

The end of the story, given in the last two verses, reminds us again that the responsible party was Abram. Hagar returned and submitted (to an extent), bore a son, and told Abram the name that God had given the boy. It was Abram's responsibility as head of the home to give names to the children. Hagar could not do that even though God had spoken to her. Thus, Abram remained the responsible party. It was not the women primarily who were at fault for this tragedy. It was Abram for he knew better. He was the one who spoke directly with God. He was the one who had the promises given to him. He was the one who ought to have led in his home.

Let me review some of what we have seen. First, a clear choice was presented to Abram—the two women stood before him. The choice included the option to trust God in a situation that seemed difficult if not impossible and to refuse to trust anything else. This reflects an unwillingness to replace God with our own wisdom and strength. On the other side, the choice offered replacing God with man's means. All of us need to recognize every day of our lives that we will have to choose between faith and self-effort. The choices resemble each other, but we are forced again and again to choose either to let Jesus Christ be Lord of our lives or to be lord in his place. And it is this pride, this idolatry, which is at the heart of all wickedness.

Secondly, let us consider how weariness of spirit affects us—the kind of vulnerability it produces. God will call each one of us to dry periods when the days seem to run together and there is nothing going on as far as we can see: no sons are being born; there is no place to go, nothing dramatic to do. There will be times when there is no voice from God and the visions cease. At times like these, filled with weariness and uncertainty as to what God is doing and why he is not doing it more quickly, we are the most vulnerable. This vulnerability shows up most powerfully in our homes. The hardest thing for a Christian man or woman to do is to succeed in being godly in

his or her home, to minister to all of the tension—the long-standing confusion, the heartaches and bad memories, the tears, and the guilty choices. To be in this situation and trust the Lord to be a life-giver, for men especially as leaders in the home, is the hardest thing we will ever be called to do. And the times when we are most tired, most uncertain, and most distant are when we are most vulnerable. Tim Hansel wrote some helpful things on family life in his book "What Kids Need Most in a Dad":

Isn't it possible, I thought later, that God reveals Himself most quietly and most profoundly in our own homes? Isn't it possible that the Christian home is the very place where we discover God in the framework of truth and love? Could it be that the family is the sacred place, along with the church, where our children get an x-ray of sorts into what God is really like? Could it be that amid all the daily complications, amid all the frustrations and hopes, amid all the tedium and interruptions, the pricelessness of God is revealed daily if we but have eyes to see Him?...And a servant wants to lead like Jesus. Simply defined, a leader is a man who has followers. We are called to be strong leaders in our homes, where our children are watching us even more carefully than we realize. While the Scripture reference may not be running through their minds, our families are watching us to see if we have come not to be served, but to serve and give our lives for their benefit (Mark 10:45).

Abram had an opportunity to exercise godly leadership—loving, sensitive, and uplifting—with his wife. But he was too weary, distant, and dry to trust God. I hope we will recognize that if a man like this faces this kind of danger then we need to be especially vigilant to be faithful in our family life. Only then can we succeed when we face the kind of pressures that came upon Abram.

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