

Life of Abraham

November 28, 2011

Genesis 16

It is of importance to note the date that is given in this chapter. The last date we had was in Genesis 12:4 where we are told that Abram was seventy-five years old when he left Haran to go to the promised land. Now here in chapter 16 we are told that Abram and Sarai had lived in Canaan for ten years. That means that Abram was at least eighty-five years old, and probably two or three years older than that if you add the time that they had been in Egypt. But, thinking just on the basis of the years mentioned, we probably are safer to stick with the eighty-five years as Abram's age. After all, facing the situation that Abram and Sarai were facing, a year or two or three would have made no change in their situation.

God had promised them a son and a family and a nation before they left Ur of the Chaldees. We can say that Abram and Sarai had obeyed the Lord in going to the land that the Lord promises to show them. But still they had no son even though they had been waiting for over ten years counting the time that it had taken them to go from Ur to Haran. We could actually say that Abram and Sarai had done what God told them to do, but God had not yet done what He had promised them that He would do – and that was to give them a son! Becoming a nation was completely out of the question is they did not first have a son. Besides, if they had waited as long as they had without having a son, wouldn't you be inclined to think, as Sarai did, that God was not going to give them a son? OR, maybe God was not going to give Abram and Sarai a child of their own, but that it might be that He would give them a son, as we would say, by adoption. At least it appeared so to Sarai, and Abram, as we see, went along with her thought. It all looked so reasonable. Even in those days people reached the age when they could no longer have children, and it looked to Sarai, and then to Abram, that that might be what they were facing. They thought that if God had not given them a son after ten plus years, that they had been mistaken in thinking that He would!

I wonder if they ever thought about Egypt. They got into trouble because they did not wait on the Lord then, to see how He would provide for them in the famine. And so they took matters in their own hands and went down into Egypt, never intending to stay there, but to be there until the famine was over in Canaan.

Here are two lessons for us to show that one of the greatest danger we face in the life of faith, is not in our circumstances, *but in us!* And it is called *impatience*.

We have a great advantage over Abram and Sarai because we have the whole Bible now, and they had no written revelation. God spoke directly to them in those days, or He appeared to them in visions, or He sent others to them with His message. And I am sure that the Lord had other ways of guiding them. But the lesson in Genesis 16 is the same lesson that we hope we learned in Genesis 12, and that is, "Rest in the Lord, and wait patiently for Him" (Psa. 37:7). Or, a favorite like Proverbs 3:5-6:

Or I wonder if Abram and Sarai had any idea of the truth stated later by the prophet Isaiah in Isaiah 55:8-11:

8 For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord.

9 For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.

10 For as the rain cometh down, and the snow from heaven, and returneth not thither, but watereth the earth, and maketh it bring forth and bud, that it may give seed to the sower, and bread to the eater:

11 So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it.

Abram and Sarai stepped out with nothing but the Word of God in their hearts and under their feet. There was

nothing unclear about God's promise. *But while God's promises are sure, He hardly ever says when He is going to fulfil them, or how.* Did Sarai think that the Lord would lie to them? I am sure that, if you had asked her, she would have quickly told you, "No, God cannot lie. And so I believe God." But her suggestion to her husband showed that she did not trust the Lord so completely that she was willing to leave the timing of the fulfillment in God's hands, exactly the same mistake that Abram made in Genesis 12. We all would say that we believe the promises of God, but we are not really trusting Him to fulfil His word in His time. This is probably one of the most difficult situations any of can face. Maybe there is a difference between faith and trust. We know God would not lie to us. He cannot do that because He is God. But when we feel that we have waited long enough, have given Him enough time to do what He said He would do, but then we have a hard time trusting Him. I am sure that Sarai thought long and hard about their situation. Time was running out. They were getting older, and she still was not pregnant. Surely, she thought, God is going to give us a son in a different way from what we have been expecting Him to do.

Now the Lord did not tell us about Abram in chapter 12, and about Sarai, and also Abram in chapter 15, to embarrass them, or to expose their weak faith, but so that we would not do what they did. Remember what the Apostle Paul wrote for us in Romans 15:4:

4 For whatsoever things were written afore time were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope.

Not only was Sarai and Abram's faith and trust affected, but so was their hope.

This makes me think of the way the Apostle Paul concluded that wonderful thirteenth chapter of 1 Corinthians. You will remember that he said,

13 And now abideth faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love (1 Cor. 13:13).

What keeps our faith and hope strong, is the conviction in our hearts of God's unchanging love. Perhaps this also was a need in Sarai's heart, although usually women are stronger in believing in the love of God, that is, His love for us, than men are. God's love never ceases, never falters, never allows God to forget our needs. And the stronger our love for the Lord is, the stronger will be our faith, and the stronger will be our hope.

Often what we call "unanswered prayer," is simply one of God's purposeful and loving delays. Can't you hear Sarai saying something like this: "You will never know how often I have prayed for a son. But God has been totally silent. I just don't understand it." We have the epistle of James to help us on this. Right at the beginning of his epistle, he wrote these words:

2 My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations;

3 Knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience.

4 But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing (James 1:2-4).

One of the greatest trials we have is a trial of our faith. Everything seems to be at a standstill. The more we pray, the more confused we get. And so the temptation is to stop praying at all.

Now let us see: What did Sarai decide to do?

16:1 Sarai had no children. That was her problem. It is significant that as she mulled over this problem day after day, her thoughts seem finally to have gone, not continually to the Lord, but to her handmaid, named Hagar. But what was especially important was that she was an Egyptian. Where did she come from? Obviously from the time Abram and Sarai spent in Egypt. I think that we are safe in assuming that she was an idolater. But I want to point out something about that as we get farther down into the chapter. Hagar could not advise Sarai about the will of God, but Sarai had another plan. It is interesting how we try to work around the Lord when we can't hear directly from Him.

16:2 Here we can't help but be amazed at Sarai. The thought that came to her mind was in complete agreement with the culture of the day. But one thing we do know that Sarai knew, and that was that when the Lord created Adam, and saw that he needed a helper, the Lord just gave Adam one wife, not even two. But people in those days didn't care about what God's plan was, just like that idea has been fairly well discarded in our own day.

Notice how Sarai expressed her plan to Abram. She said, "The Lord has restrained me from bearing," and she might have added, "I have just thought of a plan to get what He promised that He would give me." It is hard to think of a believer even thinking that; Sarai not only thought it, *she said it!* Her idea did not come from the Lord. It arose out of a godless culture. If a plan is pleasing to the world, it is generally true that it is not pleasing to God. Let us beware of doing anything just because it is legal.

But Sarai's words meant, Maybe Hagar will give me what the Lord refused to give me. You see the delay that Sarai had experienced had actually destroyed her faith, not completely, but just enough to make her a prey to her own thoughts and ways. She would have been kept from doing what she did if she had done what David did as a regular habit in his life. He said,

16 I have set the Lord always before me: because He is at my right hand, I shall not be moved
(Psa. 16:8).

And Abram was having the same trouble as his wife at this point because we read, "And Abram hearkened to the voice of Sarai." He didn't say, "Let's pray." It even would have been better if he had said, "Well, my dear, let's just wait a little while longer for the Lord to answer our prayer." No, he agreed with her right away. But if Abram had loved Sarai as he was supposed to love her, he would not have agreed to disobedience to God whatever form it might take.

And so, what happened?

16:3 Put the first part of this verse together with the last part. "And Sarai Abram's wife took Hagar her maid the Egyptian . . . and gave her to her husband to be his wife." Here is Sarai promoting polygamy. I have a hard time understanding this. Sarai was deliberately doing what she had to know in her heart was sin! Remember: This wasn't Hagar's idea; this was Sarai's idea.

Verse 4 tells us that it worked, or did it?

16:4 This was something that Sarai had not counted on because Hagar had conceived, but Sarai hadn't. Socially this moved Hagar higher than Sarai, and Hagar knew it. "Her mistress was despised in her eyes." Hagar treated Sarai as being inferior to her. She treated her with contempt.

Perhaps this reminds you of the story of Elkanah and his two wives, Peninah and Hannah which were read about in 1 Samuel 1, and the trouble that it caused for Hannah. Peninah had several children, but Hannah had none. We don't know how this marriage came about, but clearly it was in violation of the will of God. Let us remember that unpleasant results always follow when there is a violation of the will of God as expressed in the Word of God. Hannah's grievance was just like Sarai's, but the way Hannah handled it was far superior to the way that Sarai responded to Hagar.

16:5 To make matters worse, Sarai did not go to the Lord to confess the sins which she had committed. Instead she blamed her husband. This is similar to what took place in the Garden of Eden when the Lord came to face them with the wrong that they had done. There was no repentance, no confession of sin. Eve blamed the Devil. Adam blamed Eve. It is so easy for us to sidestep our relationship to God when we start

blaming others for the sins we have committed. Abram did sin by going along with Sarai's plan, but Sarai was the instigator.

It seems like it is especially difficult for us even to confess our sins from day to day. It is so easy to make excuses instead of facing the facts. Sarai's sin was major, but we are all continually sinning in what we think, or in what we say, or in what we do. In our times with the Lord each day we need to spend time confessing our sins, and praying that the Lord will make us more sensitive to the sins in our lives. And let us remember that there are sins of omission as well as sins of commission. That is, we sometimes sin by not doing what we should do, or by not giving what we should give. Sarah found out, too, that sins are like the links of a chain. That is, one sin leads to another. Sarai sinned by even allowing the thought of giving Hagar to Abram for the purpose of having a child. Then she sinned by doing it. Then she sinned by blaming Abram. And then, as we see in verse 6, she sinned in making life so miserable for Hagar that she fled away. And you ladies will be able to appreciate what problems this could have caused for Hagar in her pregnancy.

16:6 Abram had an unhappy wife, Sarai, and he didn't know what she should do. It would have been good if he given her some spiritual help. But instead he said, "Behold, thy maid is in thine hand; do to her as it pleaseth thee." What they needed to be concerned about, was not what was pleasing to Sarai, *but what was pleasing to the Lord*. So we can see that both Abram and Sarai needed spiritual help. They remind us that what we can do, is not always what we should do. All of us have a natural inclination to do the wrong thing unless the Lord has been working some great changes in our lives.

So Sarai did what she wanted to do. "Sarai dealt hardly with her, and she fled from her face." Sarai made life so miserable for Hagar, that Hagar fled. She had to get away. Sarai made Hagar work harder than ever, and she could never please Sarai regardless of how much she tried. Hagar had no choice but to leave. At this point Abram and Sarai's home spiritually was in shambles.

16:7 But just at that moment a wonderful thing happened. It didn't happen to Abram. Nor did it happen to Sarai. But it did happen to Hagar. Abram didn't go looking for Hagar. Nor did Sarai go looking for her. She evidently was glad that Hagar was gone. But "the Angel of the Lord found her by a fountain of water in the wilderness." Now the first question that we need to ask, is, Who was "the Angel of the Lord." ? Well, we will see as we read on.

What we see now is that "the Angel of the Lord found her." This means that He was looking for her. The first six verses only mention the Lord one time, and that is when Sarai, in anything but a loving way, said to her husband, "The Lord judge between me and thee" (v. 5). Hagar could have felt deserted by everyone, but she was soon to discover that there was One Who cared for her, and Who was looking for her. Hagar didn't know where to go. Some feel that she may have planned to go back to Egypt. But that is only a guess.

16:8 The Angel called her by name: "Hagar." That must have startled her. And then He asked her two questions. In our language it was, "Where did you come from, and where are you going?" She only answered the first question because at this point she didn't know the answer to the second. So she simply said to the Angel, "I flee from the face of my mistress Sarai." The one person in the world that she didn't want to be with, or even see, was Sarai.

But then the Angel of the Lord told her what she was supposed to do. Calvin said about the angel, Although Moses does not describe the form of the vision, yet I do not doubt, that it was clothed in a human body; in which, nevertheless, manifest tokens of celestial glory were conspicuous (Genesis, p. 430).

16:9 Here we have the words of the Angel. They are words that I am sure that Hagar did not want to hear. As you can see He said, “Return to thy mistress, and submit thyself under her hands.” It was not just that she was to go back to Abram’s house, but the Angel said specifically that she was to return to her mistress, and submit herself to Sarai’s hands. Return and submit.

I want to make a suggestion here. This is not stated in the text, but it seems to me that there is evidence enough in this chapter for me to say that Hagar had become a child of God. I believe that she had been saved since she came to live with Abram and Sarai. I would even go so far as to say that Sarai may have been the major instrument in the hand of God that God had used to lead Hagar to the Lord. She may not have told Abram and Sarai that she was saved, but the Angel’s appearance and words seem to indicate that she knew the Lord.

In the first place, the Angel went looking for Hagar just like the Lord Jesus taught that a shepherd will leave ninety-nine sheep to go looking for one that is lost. The Lord Jesus also said that the Shepherd calls his own sheep by name. The Angel immediately called Hagar by her name. The Angel asked her where she had come from even though he knew. But what he told her to do was instruction, we learn in the NT, is meant primarily for believers: return and submit. And then he gave her the great promises that are inverses 10, 11, and 12.

16:10 It is very evident that God had His hand upon Hagar. The promise here is very similar to the way the descendants of Abraham would be multiplied.

16:11 Here Hagar was told that she will have a child, a son, and that his name would be Ishmael, which means, *the Lord heareth*. This would have been a great encouragement to Hagar realizing that she did not need to tell the Angel why she was running away because He had seen it all. This is good for us to remember. Solomon has told us in Proverbs 15:3 that “the eyes of the Lord are in every place, beholding the evil and the good.” And very similar to that is the 21st verse of Proverbs 5, “For the ways of man are before the eyes of the Lord, and He pondereth all his goings.” These are warnings for all of us against sin, but an encouragement for believers to know that God sees everything, hears everything, and knows everything. More than that, He controls everything. He not only sees the outward appearances of men, but He sees and knows our hearts. What an amazing God we have.

Many Arabs trace their lineage to Ishmael. Wouldn’t it be something if I am interpreting the evidence here correctly, and that the mother of Ishmael was a true believer in the living God?

16:12 The prediction was the Ishmael’s descendants, at least in their leadership, would be a restless and war-like people.

16:13 Here we realize that the Angel Who has been speaking to Hagar was the Lord Himself. But which Person of the Godhead do we have here? To cover ground that we have covered more than once before, let me say that John 1:18 declares that “no one has seen God at any time.” And this is a very emphatic statement. It mean that never, under any circumstances, has any man, woman, or child, has any man seen God. But then the Apostle John went on to say that “the only begotten Son . . . hath declared Him.” So this means that every appearance of God in the OT had to be our Lord. And Hagar perceived that the Angel of the Lord Who had been questioning her, and giving her promises, was none other than God, the Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Theologians call such an appearance as a preincarnate appearance of Christ, that is, an appearance of Christ before His incarnation, or before He came in human flesh. Hagar was truly amazed that she had received such a vision, or revelation of God.

To sum up what we have in this chapter, our Lord hears all and He sees all. He knows us by name. He seeks us

when we go astray. And He comforts and encourages us with His promises.

16:14 The “fountain of water” mentioned in verse 7 where the Lord found Hagar, is now given a commemorative name: Beer-la-hai-roi. It means *the well of the living One Who sees me*. It would always be remembered by Hagar not primarily where she saw the Lord, but where the Lord saw her. That is what impressed her, and made her realize that that was always true. May we never forget it for ourselves in our times of need. There is great comfort in our knowing that the Lord hears and sees, and so He knows. This is true for us always! It is true of all men. That which is a source of such great comfort to us must also be a great warning to those who do not know the Lord.

The last two verses of this chapter (**16:15-16**) indicate that Hagar did go back to Abram and she gave him a son, Ishmael. And what is just as significant is the fact that there is no more mention of trouble between Hagar and Sarai after Hagar went back. A break between Hagar and Abram does take place later, but for the present here in chapter 16 there seems to have been peace as Hagar went back and submitted herself to Sarai. It is unfortunate that Hagar was the instrument whom God used to bring peace to Abram’s house, not Sarai. It seems to me that Hagar may have been the more godly of the two.