

ROBUST FAITH: SERMONS ON ABRAHAM

VI. “A ‘Reasonable’ Alternative to Faith”

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Genesis 16

INTRODUCTION

Bobbye Byerly tells about the first time she and her older son worked as counselors with a Billy Graham Crusade. It was at Shea Stadium in New York. As they met at the stadium for the opening night of training for the counselors, the airplanes from La Guardia Airport flew over by the dozens each hour. Billy Graham was having difficulty being heard over the roar of the jet engines. Finally he paused, glanced up and said, “This won’t do for the crusade!” Then he bowed his head and said a simple prayer to the effect: “Lord, we ask you to shift the wind so that for the crusade these planes aren’t flying over the stadium. Thank You. Amen.”

“Well,” Bobbye says, “While we were believers, this was a tall order. We weren’t sure what, if anything to expect. But God did it— He answered our prayers in a wondrous way! The winds changed during the night and different runways at La Guardia had to be used, so no jets flew over Shea Stadium for the several nights of the crusade. Thousands came to know Christ those nights. At the conclusion of the crusade, the winds reverted to their normal flow and airplanes were again taking off over Shea Stadium.”

I’d call that a “God-sized” prayer. While we know God can do such big things, I think we have a tendency to dilute our faith into more of a supplement to what we are able to do in our strength. One question in our Sunday School class last week especially got me thinking: “What am I doing that I could not do apart from the power of God?” Oh of course we can affirm in a general sense that all we have comes from God and He is always with us helping us. But this question has in mind specific things, totally beyond our ability— like walking on water or changing the flight patterns at La Guardia. I know I play it safe way too much of the time so that I’m not caught short if God doesn’t come through. But, I think most of us are there too. The saying, “God helps those who help themselves,” is almost seen as having the force of Scripture. (It is not in the Bible). While there is an element of truth in that, most of us are into tackling what we can handle, *hoping* for a little help from God. But, if He doesn’t come through, we’ll still be able to carry it off fairly well anyway.

By the way, I’ve been amazed at how our adult Sunday School class has paralleled these sermons. It wasn’t planned by me. I didn’t see any connection when I decided to use John Ortberg’s book, *If You Want to Walk on Water, You’ve Gotta Get Out of the Boat* for our class. But, week after week, it seems Abraham’s story is dealing with many of the same issues. Certainly that has been the leading of the Holy Spirit.

This morning’s lesson from Abraham helps us wrestle with this temptation to try to do God’s

will in our own strength.

A REASONABLE ALTERNATIVE TO FAITH

Abraham is now 85 years-old and has been in the land of Canaan for 10 years. In the previous chapter, Abram has had the promise of an heir and the land reiterated again for the third time. But, there is still no heir and he still doesn't own a square foot of the land promised.

READ Gen. 16:1-6

I think we can easily reconstruct the thinking behind this. While the promises increase, the possibilities of fulfillment, from a human perspective, are decreasing and becoming more remote with each passing day. Human logic saw no solution, but it did see a loophole. The ancient law of Abram's day, recorded in the Code of Hammurabi and the Nuzi Tablets, made provision to have a child by proxy through a woman's personal maid. So it is that Sarai makes this offer of her Egyptian maidservant, Hagar. So this is not immoral according to the customs of that day. They are going with accepted practice and human reasoning. Remember, God had not yet revealed His plan through the Mosaic code and The Ten Commandments.

I can imagine Abram and Sarai discussing this. "We can't just keep waiting around. I'll bet God intends for us to use our heads, to use the means at hand. Can't he do this through Hagar? The child will still be considered our child— she's just a kind of surrogate mother." And then, Abram remembers the last promise God gave him— "*a son coming from your own body will be your heir* (15:4)." God's promise said nothing about Sarai's body— so, Abram thinks, maybe this could be the way.

Of course, what Abram and Sarai don't know is that God's plan involves waiting another 15 years, when Abraham was 100 years-old, for him to father a child through Sarah's body. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, Paul affirms in Rom. 4:19 that at that time Abraham's body was "*as good as dead*" as far as his ability to father a child was concerned and that likewise "*Sarah's womb was also dead.*" While Sarah was 10 years younger than Abraham, she would have been 90— well past menopause. Paul says this is because God "*...gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were*" (Rom. 4:17).

We need to be careful with human reasoning that provides an alternative to faith. Our self-sufficiency can rob us of the power of God— the power of the miraculous. While it is God's will to give Abram an heir— this is not the way to do it. It is often our tendency to try to do God's will in our way and our time. We may be right on knowing God's will— but if it is not in His way and His time, it will not accomplish His ends. Pioneering missionary doctor, David Livingstone said it well, "Without Christ, not one step; with Him, anywhere!"

I remember a pastor telling me, with some chagrin, of his determination earlier in his ministry to be successful. He defined success as having a large growing church. One Sunday for worship he said he even hired an expert with a Samurai sword to, while blindfolded, slice through a

watermelon perched on a fat man's belly. They did set a record for attendance. And, he said, they rationalized it all because people "heard" the Gospel that may not have heard it otherwise. Well, from a purely human view, that will probably be a more sure way of drawing a crowd than praying and seeking God's blessing. Good (or even bad) entertainment trumps prayer. And, there's always the disquieting thought that maybe God's ways and means won't produce the results we want.

CONSEQUENCES OF HUMAN INGENUITY

Here we see what happens when we go with our plans instead of God's way. First of all, Hagar's presence is suspect here. Did Abram acquire her for Sarai in Egypt, when he went down there because of the famine? Remember how, fearing for his life, Abram lied to Pharaoh about Sarai being his wife telling her, "So that I will be treated well... and my life will be spared.." (12:13). Sacrificing her to Pharaoh's palace, we are told Pharaoh treated Abram well and Abram "acquired sheep and cattle, male and female donkeys, menservants and maidservants, and camels" (12:16). Is that where Hagar entered the household? It could be another negative long-range consequence of Abram's decision to go to Egypt without God's blessing or guidance.

Now, when Hagar finds she's pregnant, she "despised" Sarai or "treated her with contempt." Maybe it was an adult version of "I've got something you don't/ can't have!" Here we have wounded pride, jealousy, hate, malice— just a lot of ugliness. Now remember, this was Sarai's idea, but she blames Abram saying, "*You are responsible for the wrong I am suffering*" (5). So, Abram tells Sarai that Hagar is her servant, and to do whatever she wants to her. Remember that Abram is a willing partner in this deal— but he refuses any responsibility and turns the blame back to her, in essence saying, "Hagar's your servant. If you can't handle her, don't come to me!" As a result of the mistreatment that ensued, Hagar runs away. There's a lot of blame going on here when things go south— all because they are stepping outside God's will.

But how often are we in the same position? We make a decision on our own without knowing God's will. When things go wrong, we blame God and everyone else but ourselves. I see it with people getting over their head with debt because of purchases they wanted. There's a lot of sex going on outside the covenant of marriage, in clear violation of God's will and the consequences are always ugly. Drugs and alcohol abuse bring untold heartache. A little hedging of the truth here and there ends up coming home to haunt us as we are caught in our lies. Our pride and other passions get us into trouble. We can't step outside God's revealed will and not suffer bad things as a result.

I recently read a study done on depression in teens. A popular belief among social scientists has been that many teens begin drug use and sexual activity to deal with depression. However, just the opposite is proving to be true— depression came after drugs and sexual activity. Among girls who had taken drugs and/or experimented with sex, they were 2-3 times more likely to experience depression than "abstainers." Boys who engaged in binge drinking were 4.5 times more likely to be depressed than those who abstained. Again, stepping outside God's will for us has consequences.

GRACE

But then, we have an inspiring example of God's love and grace that comes seeking us after we've messed up. Hagar, experiencing the consequences of her insolent behavior, is now running away.

READ, Genesis 16:7-16

So again, things have gotten off-track in Abram and Sarai's faith journey. But God comes seeking, redeeming the mess they've made of things. And the fleeing Hagar is found by a ministering angel. She receives quite a revelation of God in "the angel of the Lord" (7). Not only is this the first time in the Bible we see an angel coming to someone to help them, this is the first occurrence of this specialized term in Scripture, "the angel of the Lord." The next time it occurs will be in the burning bush with Moses, 500 years later. It is often speculated that "the angel of the Lord" is more than just an angel— it is the second person of the Trinity, a pre-incarnate manifestation of Christ. In support of this, the angel of the Lord speaks for God in the first person, "I will so increase your descendants...." (10). Again, while this is speculative, it has a good basis. AND, think about it. The first pre-incarnate appearance of Christ is to a runaway slave girl. Talk about a seeking, loving, reaching-out God.

In further support of this idea is the new name revealed for God— "You are the God who sees me." The Hebrew word is *El Roi*. Think of this in contrast to the unseeing eyes of the idols, of all the gods she knew in Egypt. Here was a God who found her, knew her situation, her suffering, and also could see her and her child's future. This is the second new synonym given in the progressive revelation of the nature of God in the Abraham story. Earlier (14:19) it was "God most high," or *El Elyon*. While we are accustomed to "the God who sees" (*El Roi*), for that time this was a wonderfully assuring revelation. The implications are further expressed in 2 Chron 16:9,

*For the eyes of the Lord range throughout the earth
to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him.*

In this scene, we can marvel at God's pursuing grace, ever seeking the outcast. Hagar, of course, bears significant responsibility in the crisis she is in by her mocking attitude toward Sarai. But God, in his mercy, doesn't just let her face the consequences of her sin. He intervenes, finding her by a well of water, and in her difficulty and gives her a promise. The scene reminds us of another rejected woman by a well of water that Jesus seeks out in John 4 with redemptive revelation of His divine nature. "The angel of the Lord" engages Hagar in conversation asking her questions, getting her to honestly acknowledge her situation. Then, with the twin commands to "return" and "submit" (KJV), he gives her a promise and revelation of the significance of the child she would bear. Knowing this promise, her life is no longer defined as Sarai's slave. She's given a bigger vision and sense of purpose. She is giving life to a baby that has received the promises of God. God sees her (He is *El Roi*), knows her, and understands. Knowing this enables her to go back into the difficult circumstances and submit to Sarai. God Himself then provides her means of escape from those circumstances 13 years later, in His time (Gen. 21:12-14).

I like what F. B. Meyer says. He was the 19th century pastor in England that had much to do with D. L. Moody's success there. The language is a bit dated, but in a rather delightful way.

“We are all prone to act as Hagar did. If our lot is hard, and our cross is heavy, we start off in a fit of impatience and wounded pride. We shirk the discipline; we evade the yoke’ we make our own way out fo the difficulty. Ah! we shall never get right thus. Never! We must retrace our steps; we must meekly bend our necks under the yoke. We must accept the lot which God has ordained for us, even though it be the result of the cruelty and sin of others. We shall conquer by yielding. We shall escape by returning. Shall become free by offering ourselves to be bound. ‘Return and submit.’ By and by, when the lesson is perfectly learnt, the prison-door will open of its own accord.”

CONCLUSION

I am reminded of an incident in Jan Paderewski's career. He was a great concert pianist performing in symphony halls through much of the first half of the 20th century. His concerts were consistently sold out weeks ahead of time. In one of his concerts, a child escaped from his parents as everyone was waiting for Paderewski to come on stage. He charged up on the stage and sat down at the Steinway and began to play “Chopsticks.” You can imagine the indignation in the crowd with murmurs of: “Where are the parents?” “Who would bring a child to such an event?” “Stop him!”

But, Paderewski, hearing what was happening, quickly grabbed his formal coat and slipped onto the stage behind the boy without being seen by him. People were thinking, “Is that boy ever going to get a lecture!” Instead, Paderewski reached around the child and began to improvise on “Chopsticks,” making it literally come alive. As he did so, he whispered to the child, “Don't stop, keep on going.” Out of what looked like a disaster and social embarrassment, Paderewski wove something of unexpected beauty.

Often it seems that's what God does for us. In the confusion of life, in the messes we make of things, He slips up behind us and begins to create something new, fresh, and alive out of our failures. It doesn't matter where you've been or where you are or how badly you've failed. God is able to make a new beginning for you. If you've totally messed up plan A, with your coming to God in repentance, seeking His help, He'll begin to take the mess and make a new plan, plan B.

And, some of you are remembering a time in your life when your faith was bolder, when you knew the exhilaration of *really* trusting the Lord for what was clearly impossible for you. There was no hedging your position. If God didn't do it you knew it wouldn't happen. And you discovered the joy of His miraculous provision. But now your life is marked more by caution and being sure you don't do anything beyond what you can handle if God doesn't come through. And, frankly, there isn't much adventure to your Christian life. It is time to pray some God-sized prayers. It is time to begin seeking what it is He would like you to do beyond your power, relying solely upon His power that is at work within us (Eph. 3:20).

One of the practical ways this will be seen in a church is in gathering for prayer. Operating safely within our own resources doesn't take a lot of prayer. But if we are going to boldly do God's will in God's way—much prayer is the beginning. Tonight we'll gather for an hour of prayer—resuming our monthly vesper prayer services. I hope to see you here.

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VI. “A ‘Reasonable’ Alternative to Faith”

Read Genesis 16

1. Who does Sarai blame for Hagar's spiteful attitude?
(vs. 5)

Can you think of a time in your own life to share with the group when you took things into your own hands and when they didn't turn out, you blamed God or somebody else instead?

2. Quote from sermon, “It is often our tendency to try to do God's will in our own way and our own time. We may be right on knowing God's will – but if it is not in His way and His time, it will not accomplish His ends.” Do you agree, disagree? Why? Read Ecc. 3:11 and Ps. 31: 14 & 15.
3. Abram, in God's plan, was to wait 15 more yrs. for the promised child. Hagar waits another 13 yrs. before God allows her to escape from Sarai. Read Ps. 27:14, Ps. 129:5, Heb. 10:35 & 36, II Peter 3:8 &9.

4. Does Hagar seem to have a well thought out plan for her running away? (vs. 7 & 8)
5. What 2 things does the angel command Hagar to do?
(vs. 9)
6. There is much hostility and blame in this chapter. List the angry people and who they're mad at.
- (vs. 1) _____ blames _____
 - (vs. 4) _____ hateful towards _____
 - (vs. 5 & 6b) _____ blames _____ and mistreats _____
 - (vs. 12b) _____ is hostile to _____
- Hostility begets hostility. Do you agree?
7. List some ways you can think of to break the chain of hostility between people today.
8. Hagar is amazed and gratified that God noticed and saw her. "For the eyes of the Lord range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to Him." II Chron. 16:9. Thoughtfully reflect on this verse word for word and share your feelings and insights with the group.
9. Hagar does not deserve rescuing because of her hateful attitude. The immoral woman at the well in John 4 did not deserve attention from Jesus. Eph. 2:8 and 9 says "For it is by grace you have been saved through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works so that no one can boast." Discuss the concept of grace.