



## Genesis 16:1-16. Our Way or God's Way?

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Would you not agree that all people have many decisions to make in their daily lives? There are often many paths to choose. What are some of the important decisions we make? Some important ones might determine where we live and work, with whom we spend our time. Many decisions, though subtle, can make tremendous changes in our lives. Trying to fulfill God's purposes by means contrary to God's Word brings difficulty, heartache, and disappointment. In 1992, following being laid off after 12 years of work, I was presented with four job opportunities in four disparate parts of the country, none near our upstate New York home. The final decision was to move to North Carolina, taking a position on the faculty of UNC Charlotte. The choice of North Carolina as the location of our next job formed the context of many remaining years: where we would live, where we would attend church, where our relationships would develop, and where our ministries would be. It would be in North Carolina that our children would marry and establish families. We were not ignorant of the impact that our decision would make, and were very sensitive to God's purpose in our lives as we made that decision. We knew that the choice was upon us, and that choice would not take us out of "God's will," but we still wanted to honor God with our choice. We truly desired to go in the direction that would best benefit our obedience to God's call in our lives.

When you make decisions, whether important or not, how much of God's purpose do you engage in your choices? Young people make choices every day that can significantly impact their direction: who they associate with, the kind of entertainment they choose, the decision to abstain from sinful behaviors (or the decision to partake of them.) The very well-known "What would Jesus do" movement, inspired by Charles M. Sheldon's "In His Steps" promoted making decisions based upon God's purpose in one's life.

As we form a set of decisions, we create a plan for our lives. We establish dreams and goals. Today's society provides means for meeting those goals, and where society fails, our socialist government will often step in and provide means. Do you have a plan for your life? What is that plan? How did this plan get started? Ultimately, God has a plan for your life. What do you suppose that plan is? Certainly, that plan is one of obedience to Him and an appropriate testimony of your salvation and your faith to others. Whether you are called to the task of ministry or simply to minister to others in a secular career (such as mine as a university professor), this model of obedience and testimony does not change. As one continues making decisions, the best way is always to follow our best understanding of God's choice.

As God has a plan for your life, he will provide the means for you to complete that plan. However, in God's wisdom He will provide those resources in His way and His time. As a person with an impulsive nature, I tend to want to tackle every problem or every unfinished task I see. Such impulsiveness can lead us to make choices that are based upon our own logic or desires, choices that are not consistent with God's ultimate purpose for a situation. A good example is our bent to relieve suffering. We want to "fix it," and do so immediately, not considering that God may be doing a work through that suffering. By taking a task into our own hands we may be circumventing an opportunity for growth that God has provided.

Likewise, churches also make decisions that have a considerable impact on their future and on their ministries. Many people can be impacted by the decisions that are made by the church. Some local churches are governed by external sources such as bishops and cardinals who make up an administrative board that dictates the major ministries of the local church. Some bodies are entirely autonomous, often choosing to follow the leadership of a small number of individuals. When we look at the biblical model, we find that none of these governing models is consistent with God's desire to be the LORD of the church. Any effort to usurp the Lordship of Christ in the life of the family or in the life of the church leads only to frustration and the marginalization of God's kingdom work in the body.

In this lesson we are going to observe some of the consequences of taking things into our own hands and circumventing God's method of attaining His goals for our lives.

**Genesis 16:1. *Now Sarai Abram's wife bare him no children: and she had an handmaid, an Egyptian, whose name was Hagar.***

What has happened in the lives of Abram and Sarai up to this point? At the age of 75, Abram was called of God to leave his home and his inheritance and go to a place where God would later reveal. God said that the result of his obedience would be the birth of a child who would be the beginning of a great nation that would ultimately bless the world. What did Abram do as a result of that promise? He gathered together his close family and his possessions, and traveled into Egypt, and was now near the southernmost borders of what we might refer to as Canaan.

The actual location of this event is curious. Abram and his family are near the point where, about 400 years<sup>1</sup> later, the Children of Israel would fail to enter the land that was promised to Abram and turn back into the wilderness because of

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<sup>1</sup> c.f. Genesis 15:13.

their doubt, the area of Kadesh Barnea. Kadesh would be best known as a place of decision, a place where God's people would choose between listening to the Spirit of God, or the desires of their own flesh, as they are clearly engaged in God's kingdom purpose. We may keep that location in mind as we continue the study.

One can understand that Abram would have been expressing some frustration and concern as he is attempting to follow God's call. Having obeyed God, Abram saw no significant change in his life. He and his wife were far beyond the age of bearing children, so their barrenness certainly did not illustrate an answer to God's promise. Abram has had to defend his worldly nephew, Lot, from the wickedness of the society that his nephew had chosen. He saw an ungodly world surrounding him, with no other people trusting God as he did. He saw no fruit of the promise that God had made.

Note that God made two promises to Abram: (1) He would be led to the place God had for him, and (2) he would be blessed and have an heir. Had God fulfilled any of these promises? By entering the Canaan region, God had brought Abram to the land that he and his inhabitants were to possess. However, ten years had gone by and Abram was now 85 years old, Sarai 86. What part of God's promise was left unfulfilled? Having seen God work in their lives already, they had no doubt that God's promise would be fulfilled. However, they both realized that Sarai was far beyond child-bearing age, and so they certainly doubted her ability to bear a child. They had experienced about fifty years of infertility, and her advanced age convinced them that, if God intended them to have a child, it would not be through Sarai.

Many people face similar choices. Infertile couples who desire to have children often are forced to make some very significant decisions as to how to go about the process of parenthood. Often, God provides the means for success, whether through adoption, or other medical and clinical means. As a result, many couples are blessed with families. Certainly, the choice of having children is not the only area in our lives where we can circumvent God's purpose in our lives by taking the issue into our own hands.

Churches also face choices as they seek to follow God's purpose for their fellowship. Since churches are often ruled by individuals or by committees rather than by the Lordship of Christ, they can easily face similar challenges to following God's will. Recognizing a need, it is natural for the ruling group to simply meet and come up with a solution that meets the need. Abraham and Sarai had such a meeting. It is now 10 years since the promise, and there still is no child. At this point, Sarai and Abram chose to take matters into their own hands. They made several assumptions:

1. Their failure to have children was because of the barrenness of Sarai.

2. Sarai was too old to bear children.
3. They could obtain the heir they desired by a surrogate mother, Hagar, Sarai's Egyptian servant.

When we are faced with decisions, we are often presented with a multiple of solutions. Abram and Sarai seemed to consider only two options, either to continue to wait, or to allow Hagar to produce a child for them. It is not unrealistic to think that Sarai and Abram could have seen Hagar as the means through which God could provide for His promise to be fulfilled. Polygamy was a common and accepted practice among the pagan cultures that they encountered in their travels. It was a simple matter to rationalize away the still-small voice of the Spirit of the LORD who would be leading Abram to continue to be patient and not take matters into his own hands.

Certainly, when we are faced with choices, we often find ways of rationalizing<sup>2</sup> the solution of our desire, and can come up with a fully acceptable, but incorrect, answer. Whether or not Sarai and Abram fully considered that God still wanted them to wait, they had been seriously considering a plan to complete the second part of God's promise on their own, using a process that was outside of God's ultimate desire for them.

**Genesis 16:2. *And Sarai said unto Abram, Behold now, the LORD hath restrained me from bearing: I pray thee, go in unto my maid; it may be that I may obtain children by her. And Abram hearkened to the voice of Sarai.***

At some point Sarai came to Abram with her plan. Most likely, it is one they had talked about, and this is the point where Sarai agrees to the process. Because of the lack of other opportunities for people who are in this situation, it was quite accepted in ancient near-eastern culture to make use of a surrogate mother. The provision of an heir was an important foundational unit of their society. Only through children could the elderly be cared for. Ownership of land was maintained through the heir, usually male. If a landowner had no heir, there would be no claim on his land, and his land would be seized by others upon his death. Also, polygamy was accepted in the pagan cultures of their day.

So, to Sarai this was not a radical solution. It was an obvious solution. When we come up against obstacles that clearly stand in our way, what is our typical response? We will often attempt to solve the problem in the quickest, most efficient and effective manner. Many times, particularly if you are an "in control" type of personality, all problems are challenges to be efficiently defined and solved. When a problem arises, it must be analyzed, its impact considered, and objectives put in place which will culminate in the solution of the problem. When

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<sup>2</sup> Rationalization: logically defending an incorrect solution as being correct.

such problem solving techniques fail to listen to the still-small voice of the Holy Spirit, they have the potential of finding solutions to problems that are outside of God's best purpose. Often we find it difficult to wait on God's answer when an obvious solution presents itself.

When Abram was presented with an obvious solution his response seemed to come with little hesitation. Abram agreed to Sarai's suggestion. Rather than seeking out God's solution for the problem, he listened to the voice of his wife. Still, there was some propriety with the arrangement that Sarai was suggesting: for Abram to have a child by Hagar, he would have to take her as his wife. This choice would necessitate Abram's clear and uncompromising acceptance of the pagan practice of polygamy, a practice that God had never intended, a practice that God often spoke against. Consequently, if Abram went through with this plan, the consequences of that solution would be far greater than one might first assume.

**Genesis 16:3. *And Sarai Abram's wife took Hagar her maid the Egyptian, after Abram had dwelt ten years in the land of Canaan, and gave her to her husband Abram to be his wife.***

There is some wording used here that is interesting. Consider a similar temptation brought to Adam by his wife, Eve:

**Genesis 3:6. *And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat.***

There is a significant similarity between the account of Eve and Adam and the account of Sarai and Abram. We see a parallel in the words that are translated "took" and "gave." We find herein a play on words that clearly links the action of Sarai to the woman given to Adam. Eve led Adam into a wrong choice, just as Sarai led Abram into a wrong choice. In both cases the man knew better than to accept the choice given by the wife, and was held responsible for that decision, a responsibility that would lead to judgment. It was also a choice that led to dramatic consequences that none of them could have ever predicted.

Note also, that the ancient near-eastern cultural system already provided for the welfare of the maidservant, Hagar. For Hagar to fulfill the role of surrogate, she was to be Abram's wife. Because of the nature of the master-servant relationship that she already had with Abram and Sarai, she would always have a secure place second to Sarai. However, by becoming Abram's wife, Hagar would now be under the personal protection of Abram, rather than being a simple slave of Sarai. As such, Hagar was obligated to Abram as a wife would be. Hagar would no longer see Sarai as her master, but would see Abram as her husband. As we

observe the situation, we want to shout to Abram, "Stop!" We understand the error he is making. Like Adam who took of the fruit of the tree of knowledge at Eve's behest, Abram is about to circumvent the original plan that God had for them. Did Abram not know the nature of his error? When we make poor choices, we usually know they are not the best choice, and may rationalize away those arguments that would dissuade us. With an obvious answer in front of us, we may often choose to not fully investigate the possible consequence of that choice. Abram knew exactly what he was doing, but he had no idea of the consequences of his action.

**Genesis 16:4.** *And he went in unto Hagar, and she conceived: and when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress was despised in her eyes.*

Note the sequence of error: with the plan first conceived as a thought, it was accepted as a possibility, a method of completing the plan was determined, and finally the plan was acted out. Note that this is often the progression of events through which the faithful may choose to take part in sinful acts. The sin is first conceived as a thought. After meditating on it we rationalize away its bite and accept it as a possibility. Once accepting it as a possibility, we can act. What is the final result of such a progression? All sin has consequences that may not appear to be immediate, but are always subject to eternal judgment. The writer of the book of James describes this same sequence:

**James 1:13-15.** *Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man: <sup>14</sup>But every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed. <sup>15</sup>Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin, when it is finished, bringeth forth death.*

The result of Sarai and Abram's sin is beginning to surface even as Hagar finds out that she is pregnant. Hagar immediately began to despise Sarai and her barrenness. One can understand how this could come about. Hagar sees herself as a "better woman" than Sarai, who now is no longer her slave-master, but her aged competitor for Abram's betrothal. We do not know the nature of the relationship between Hagar and Sarai prior to this event, but it is certainly clear now. The pregnancy of Hagar served as a wedge between the two women, and a significant conflict now entered their household.

When we circumvent God's plan in our lives, we open ourselves up for any number of unforeseen events. Abram and Sarai probably had no idea that their plan would turn out this way. They simply saw this as an opportunity to have a son, an heir who would inherit the land that had been given to Abram. Undoubtedly, they saw a future where Hagar still served as Sarai's handmaiden, not as a competitor for betrothal, or a mother who would desire to keep the son

away from Sarai. Had they considered this, they would have never completed their plan.

**Genesis 16:5.** *And Sarai said unto Abram, My wrong be upon thee: I have given my maid into thy bosom; and when she saw that she had conceived, I was despised in her eyes: the LORD judge between me and thee.*

Go back to the Garden of Eden. When the woman realized that she would experience judgment as a result of her disobedience, she shifted the blame elsewhere: to the serpent. Sarai also placed the blame elsewhere, on Abram, and did so to the point of blaspheming the Name of God, implying that God would judge Abram for his action. Sarai was literally stating, "Abram, this was your fault, and the judgment will be upon you!" Was Sarai correct? Was Abram at fault for this situation. Of course, Abram was responsible for following through with Sarai's plan. Now that things had gotten so far out of control, Abram responded to the situation as most people would do: he continued to take matters into his own hands, and prescribe his own solution.

**Genesis 16:6.** *But Abram said unto Sarai, Behold, thy maid is in thy hand; do to her as it pleaseth thee. And when Sarai dealt hardly with her, she fled from her face.*

Here we see further degradation of the situation. Abram instructed Sarai to return Hagar to her previous state as a slave, empowering Sarai to treat her as one would any disobedient slave. Abram had accepted Hagar as a wife. She was no longer the property of Sarai, even by their own law. For Abram to do this was very inappropriate, and served as one more step away from obedience to God. When Sarai mistreated Hagar, Hagar fled, which by the way, is the meaning of her name. Hagar also did not fulfill her position as a wife when she fled and took the unborn heir of Abram with her.

At this point, all of their dreams and plans had fallen apart. Abram, Sarai and Hagar had each sustained grievous losses. Abram and Sarai had taken matters into their own hands when God had a quite different plan for them, one that would demonstrate His power, not theirs. The result of the disobedience of Abram and Sarai was disastrous. By fleeing into the wilderness, Hagar would surely die, and her child with her. Since Abram made no effort to retrieve Hagar from her and his unborn son's impending death in the desert, this was clearly the final solution to Abram and Sarai's chosen plan. Their plan ended in murder.

**Genesis 16:7-9.** *The angel of the LORD found Hagar near a spring in the desert; it was the spring that is beside the road to Shur. <sup>8</sup>And he said, Hagar, Sarai's maid, whence camest thou? and whither wilt thou go? And she said, I flee from the face of my mistress Sarai. <sup>9</sup>And the*

***angel of the LORD said unto her, Return to thy mistress, and submit thyself under her hands.***

Often, when as a result of our own sin we find ourselves at the lowest point, God then steps in to initiate His redemptive purpose. It is in this way that God uses these experiences to bring us closer to Him. When in hiding, a messenger from the Lord, Yahweh, Jehovah, came to Hagar and comforted her. Had Hagar stayed in the desert, she would surely die. Her banishment from Abram and Sarai was not God's plan at all, and at this point God intervened. The messenger from God told Hagar to return to Sarai as her handmaiden, not as the wife of Abram. It is clear that even the marriage that Abram and Sarai had arranged was not one that was ordained by God. Sarai was Abram's wife, and Abram's relationship with Hagar was never a part of God's plan for them. If there was any doubt of this up to this point in the mind of Hagar, the messenger would have now cleared that up. Hagar is to return to Sarai and accept her place as the handmaiden, surrendering her position as Abram's wife.

***Genesis 16:8-11. And the angel of the LORD said unto her, I will multiply thy seed exceedingly, that it shall not be numbered for multitude. <sup>11</sup>And the angel of the LORD said unto her, Behold, thou art with child, and shalt bear a son, and shalt call his name Ishmael; because the LORD hath heard thy affliction.***

The messenger then revealed a little about the future of her child. God had promised Abram that he would have many descendants, and that promise applied to Hagar as well as Sarai. After all, this child would always be a child of Abraham. This child would be a son whom she would call *Ishmael*, a name that means, "the Lord hears."

***Genesis 16:12. And he will be a wild man; his hand will be against every man, and every man's hand against him; and he shall dwell in the presence of all his brethren.***

The messenger also reveals the nature of the nations that would come from Ishmael. Ishmael and those after him would continue to dwell in the land of "his brethren" (the descendents of Isaac) and would be in a continual state of war with them. The Arab nations claim that they are also the descendents of Abram, through Ishmael, who they believe is the rightful recipient of Abraham's blessing. They hold that the children of Israel have usurped that position that is rightfully theirs. This was the nature of the conflict between Ishmael and Isaac, and is still, in part, the basis for the enmity between Jews and their Arab neighbors. The basis for the Arab-Israeli conflict goes back to this very point in history. The descendents of half-brothers Ishmael and Isaac have hated each other for almost 4000 years, and for that entire time have been engaged in a blood feud that,

according to the biblical narrative, will not end until it is terminated by God's direct intervention.<sup>3</sup>

When Abram and Sarai chose to obtain an heir using their own means, they had no idea of the ultimate consequences of their sin. By circumventing God's plan in their lives, by stepping out in front of God's ultimate solution for themselves, they set in motion events that would shape the most significant nature of the experience of their descendants: constant warfare with their neighbors.

**Genesis 16:13-16.** *And she called the name of the LORD that spake unto her, Thou God seest me: for she said, Have I also here looked after him that seeth me? <sup>14</sup>Wherefore the well was called Beerlahairoi; behold, it is between Kadesh and Bered. <sup>15</sup>And Hagar bare Abram a son: and Abram called his son's name, which Hagar bare, Ishmael. <sup>16</sup>And Abram was fourscore and six years old, when Hagar bare Ishmael to Abram.*

As the Lord had said, Hagar bore Abram a son. Abram got what he wanted, but at what cost?

Finding God's will for our lives is not a mystery. The faithful seek to follow God's will, both as individuals and as a fellowship of believers, simply because He is LORD. God's will is not found until we get our own pride and our own agenda out of the way. Abram and Sarai failed in their attempt to follow God's will because of their own self-will, arranging their own solution without the counsel of the Holy Spirit. Churches can also do this collectively. Consider the example of a "committee meeting" of the apostles that took place immediately following Jesus' ascension:

**Acts 1:24-26.** *And they prayed, and said, Thou, Lord, which knowest the hearts of all men, show whether of these two thou hast chosen, <sup>25</sup>That he may take part of this ministry and apostleship, from which Judas by transgression fell, that he might go to his own place. <sup>26</sup>And they gave forth their lots; and the lot fell upon Matthias; and he was numbered with the eleven apostles.*

It is a very easy thing to step in front of the Holy Spirit's leadership when leaders have their own agenda. The apostles decided that it was the LORD's will that Judas be replaced, so they selected two individuals who had been faithful disciples, Joseph Justice and Matthias. Note that in their prayer, they stated "thou hast chosen," attributing their choice to the LORD. They then drew lots, which was supposed to give the LORD the ability to make the final choice, and through the casting of lots they chose Matthias. It is not surprising that, though

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<sup>3</sup> c.f. Ezekiel 37.

we have a great deal of biblical and historical data that describes the lives and ministries of the other eleven apostles, we never again hear of Matthias.

Though we are not aware of any devastating consequences of their choice, their selection of Matthias to replace Judas was clearly not God's plan for the early church. God did soon choose the zealous Pharisee, Saul, to fill that role as he would serve as an apostle to the Gentiles.

How do we find God's will as individuals and as a church? The solution is simple: recognize fully that Jesus is the one and only LORD, and seek His leadership rather than our own. God did not appoint us to be lords over one another, but rather that He would be our one LORD. For this reason Samuel told Israel that it was not God's will that they would have a king. We each serve the LORD with no man standing between our hearts and God. Consequently, with the same LORD speaking to all Christians, it is wise to listen to those who demonstrate the fruit of the Spirit in their lives.

Who speaks for the LORD? Only the LORD does, and his voice can be discerned by a heart that is truly humbled before Him. Consequently, as we listen to one another, we listen to those who demonstrate true humility and unconditional love. The world teaches that leadership is found in the proud and powerful. Jesus taught that leadership is found in the humble heart of a servant.

Abram's pride and self-will blinded Him to the miracle that God intended to work in his life. Let us surrender our pride and self-will, replacing it with humility and agape love, so that we can clearly hear the voice of the LORD.

Summary:

- Though human solutions to difficult problems may be socially acceptable, they may not be in accordance with God's will.
- Though we may not be all that we should be, God hears our prayers and always is watching over us.
- Choosing our own way instead of God's way inevitably may bring about disaster at worst, and missing God's blessing at best.
- Though we are not always faithful to God, He always is faithful to His word.

God's promise to Abraham was later fulfilled in the birth of Isaac. God's plan would ultimately be carried out in Abram's life. But the consequences of Abram's "jumping out in front of God" would be unending. Let us, as we make decisions, never fail to spend time in prayer and consider God's plan for our life when we make those decisions that choose our pathway. Will we go our way, or will we go God's way?