

In the Beginning

Message 13

Faltering Faith

Genesis 16:1-16

Weary of Waiting

Do you have trouble waiting? If so, you are not alone. Human beings are inherently impatient. Children fairly ooze impatience while waiting for Christmas or their birthday. You are too mature to wake up early on Christmas morning, but last year most people at this camp went online to get their grades rather than wait until they got home. The most difficult wait for people your age tends to be news about grad school, or a job – or the response of your love interest. Even old people find it difficult to wait, and here we have Abram and Sarai waiting for God to fulfill His promise of a son. How old were they? Abram was 85 when this chapter begins. Not exactly one of the young and restless! But in this case, his age added to Abram's impatience.

God had called Abram from the city of Ur in far-off Mesopotamia and promised to make a great nation of him. At that time Abram had no children, but he believed God and obeyed God's call. God protected Abram from a close call when Pharaoh in Egypt tried to take his wife Sarai into his harem. He provided for Abram during a famine, and helped him rescue his nephew Lot from predatory kings. God renewed His promise to Abram and even emphasized His intention to bring a huge number of descendants from him – all in spite of the glaring fact that Abram and Sarai had *no* children. In the last chapter we read that Abram, "believed in the LORD, and He [the Lord] accounted it to him for righteousness." (Genesis 15:6) So far so good. Abram trusted God's promise, even though appearances were otherwise.

This is the essence of faith, to trust God, even if appearances seem to contradict Him. The question is always one of trust. What do you ultimately trust – God, or your friends, or the "experts", or your own two eyes? If God really is the good, loving, omnipotent person He claims to be, isn't it more sensible to trust Him than anyone else – even your own senses? The book of Hebrews describes faith as "the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." (Hebrews 11:1) Paul said, "hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one still hope for what he sees?" (Romans 8:24b) So you see faith operates only when you cannot see something. If appearances support a conviction, that conviction is not held by faith, it is held by sight. If Abram and Sarai had already had children, they would not have trusted God for a child. They would have gotten busy and conceived another like they conceived the first. But if they cannot have children, yet God promises to give them one, they must live by faith – by trusting God in spite of appearances – and that involves waiting. Paul continued saying, "But if we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for it with perseverance," (Romans 8:25) and perseverance is what was called for here. Unfortunately, Abram and Sarai's perseverance began to run out.

Solving God's Problem

How long would you wait, if God promised you a child? Perhaps some of you do not really want children yet, so you might be willing to wait for several years. But in Abram's case, he was getting old, and so was Sarai. Soon they would be too old to conceive. And after Sarai passed menopause, it would be all over. So year after year marched on. Abram and Sarai waited ten years, and finally their faith faltered. They searched for a way to get a child in their own ability.

Sarai made the first move. Fortunately Sarai had a servant who was of child-bearing age. Custom permitted Sarai to give her servant to her husband. A child thus conceived could then be considered her own. Two generations later both of Jacob's wives used this strategy as they jockeyed for supremacy in the household. So Sarah offered Hagar to Abram. But notice how Sarai brings up the subject. "The LORD has restrained me from bearing children." Although this is true, Sarai seems to be blaming God for her problem.

In fact there is no problem. God is planning to give Abram and Sarai a child in His time. The problem is in Sarai's mind. She is tired of waiting for God. It's been ten years, for Pete's sake!

We don't know what Abram thought about Sarai's suggestion. The text doesn't tell us if he was reluctant or enthusiastic. We can't tell if he felt nagged by Sarai, or depressed because he had no children. All we need to know is that Abram took Sarai's advice and took Hagar to bed. Abram is the head of his house, and ultimately all that matters is his decision. How he felt about it is irrelevant.

The plan worked! Praise God, Abram soon had a little boy growing inside his wife's servant. But rather than pleasure, this "success" brought decades of misery for Abram and Sarai. As soon as Hagar conceived, she immediately despised Sarai her mistress. Now you might think this is bizarre, or even twisted. Why should Hagar despise Sarai because Sarai couldn't have children? It's not as though it was Sarai's fault. Sarai didn't sin or even do anything foolish to cause her barrenness. For that matter, what did Hagar do to conceive? The ability to conceive is not due to a woman's intelligence or skill or even beauty. Fertility is a quality that most ordinary women possess. Doesn't it seem cruel and childish for Hagar to gloat over Sarai?

Sarai of course was furious! Her plan totally backfired. Instead of having a child through her servant, now the servant has a child and the mistress has nothing. Not only does Sarai still have no child, now she is mocked by her own servant, who would still be a slave in Egypt if Abram had not bought her for Sarai. The injustice of it all! In her intense anger Sarai lashes out at Abram and blames him for her problems. Speaking of injustice! But although it was immature for Sarai to blame Abram when she was the one who suggested he take Hagar, it was not entirely unjust. As the head of his house, the buck always stops with Abram. He is responsible for the decisions of his household, and in this case he certainly didn't have to take Sarai's suggestion. Sarai doesn't stop with blaming Abram. She calls on God to judge between her and her husband. Having refused to wait for God to give her a child, now she wants God to punish her husband for doing as she asked!

Abram is in an impossible situation. If he defends Hagar too strongly, Sarai will be impossible to live with. On the other hand, he has made love to Hagar and she is bearing his child. He couldn't possibly sell her. So Abram devises a shrewd solution. (He didn't become wealthy by making dumb decisions!) He gives Sarai permission to treat Hagar as harshly as she wishes. This removes Abram from the picture entirely. It allows Sarai to vent her full feelings on Hagar instead of Abram. Any further problems that arise will be Sarai's fault entirely. Sarai took out her anger on Hagar, but by now it is apparent that Hagar is no doormat. She refused to take Sarai's mistreatment and ran away. Is that for the best? Now Sarai is lacking a servant, but Abram has hundreds of other servants. The home-wrecking servant is gone, but with her is Abram's son – the child whom God promised, so they thought. Now Abram and Sarai are back where they started, but with a badly fractured marriage a lost servant, and no child.

Waiting For God

What can we learn from the mess Abram and Sarai fell into? The obvious lesson is not to rush God. God did eventually provide a child for Abram and Sarai, this time through Sarah. But they had to wait 15 more years! Impossible, you say! For one thing, wasn't Sarah past menopause by then? And even if that weren't an issue, it is totally unreasonable to expect anyone to wait that long! Well, who says it is unreasonable to wait 25 years for God to keep His promise? Who decides what is reasonable or not? You? Why should you think *your* opinion is so precious? Obviously the infinite, all-knowing, good and all-loving, perfectly just God knows a zillion times better than we what is reasonable. The problem is not God's reasonableness – it is our impatience. We easily become angry when God does not jump to our time frame.

The obvious lesson here is that God knows what is good for us, and we don't. This is a bitter truth

to accept, especially in America, the land of the free – where the highest virtue is to pursue life, liberty, and happiness. We are bred to think that we *ought* to make our own decisions, *we* know what is best for ourselves, and no one has the right to interfere. Sadly, this attitude has carried over even into homes, where parents let children think they can decide what is best for themselves. We all sing along with Billy Joel, “You can ... any time you want, but not on my time.” So everyone has his own agenda for his academic career, job, marriage, family, and no one had better meddle – including God. And if things don’t go as planned – watch out! You blame parents and teachers and friends and God. You become angry or depressed or both. All your thoughts are focused on how to get back on plan – when in fact God is forcing a mid-course correction on you because you refused to listen to Him in the first place. You sit politely here tonight and nod that God is loving and wise, but in practice, you value your wisdom over His and act as if His love is no greater than the janitor’s.

God is wise enough to know what is best for us, and He is powerful enough to make that best thing happen – in spite of impossible hurdles. Menopause? Are you kidding? Do you think that God is too weak to produce a baby in a dead womb? No, of course not you say. Well, let’s try this out on you. Suppose you fail this semester. Is God powerful enough to work out His plan for you anyway? Does He love you even when you fail? Suppose you ruin a close friendship. Are you useless to God, or can He fix you up and make you a friendly person? Can He give you other friends as good as the one you lost? Perhaps you have been sexually immoral. Do you think you are too dirty for God to ever use you in His holy Kingdom? Is God powerful and loving enough to repair the damage in your body and soul and make you sexually healthy?

Now, if you believe God is capable of these miracles in your life, are you willing to wait for Him? Or are you going to fix your problems right away on your own? If you have ruined your closest friendship, are you going to search high and low for a best friend – or are you going to love the people God brings into your life, and let Him give you that special friend in His time? If you are going to have a career, you need to take appropriate courses, study hard, and look for job opportunities. But there is a difference between faithfulness and faithlessness. Ultimately God will give you the job He wants you to have. Are you working faithfully toward that job and trusting God to provide it, or are you making sure you get it by your own effort? Where is your heart? Are you waiting for God, or are you running on your own schedule? What about a husband or wife? Are you waiting for God to bring someone into your life – a godly man or woman of His choosing? Or are you desperately hanging onto any relationship that might have some promise? Would you rather have a second-rate spouse than risk waiting for God? Where is your heart? Is it with God, or is it with someone else?

Desiring Children

The second lesson in this passage is the value of children. We look at the intensity of Sarai’s and Hagar’s feelings and we think they are immature to fight over bearing children. It seems so childish to us. There is so much more to life than children. But such thoughts reveal our ignorance of ancient oriental culture, in which children were deeply prized. Men considered their children an expansion of their own strength and women measured their usefulness by their ability to produce children. Psalm 127:3-5 expresses this attitude.

Behold, children are a heritage from the LORD
The fruit of the womb is a reward.
Like arrows in the hand of a warrior,
So are the children of one's youth.
Happy is the man who has his quiver full of them;
They shall not be ashamed, but shall speak with their enemies in the gate.

Here children are called a reward from God. They are a sign of God’s favor. Children are called

arrows. They are the means of defense against enemies. A man with many children will be strong. Jacob called Reuben, his first child, “the beginning of my strength”. (Genesis 49:3) Jacob grew into a powerful man in Canaan as he had more children.

It is a lot easier to see how children might benefit a man in an agrarian society, where you need many hands to do the field work. Those of you who have read the Little House on the Prairie books may have noticed how hard it was for Pa to develop a prosperous farm without any boys to help. Pa took life with a good spirit, but Almanzo’s father was a much more successful farmer with his several boys to help. Even in a trade society there are ways for children to help. You may have read about colonial families and how the children worked in the shops of the colonial towns. But how are children a help in a post-industrial society? And isn’t it wrong to have more children when the earth is already overpopulated?

First, the overpopulation of the earth is a lie. There are places on earth which are crowded, but there are also vast areas of the planet which are practically empty. Whoever rattles on and on about the crowding of the earth obviously has never driven across the Russian steppe land, or the African plains, or even the American prairie. I’m not saying we ought to fill every square inch of the earth with people, but I am saying the earth is not even close to being full. Furthermore, we have more food than we can use. Just this week there was an article in the Allentown newspaper reporting that one of the biggest health problems in the world is obesity. You heard me right! It’s not just in rich America – most of the world has more food than it needs. Where there is famine it is almost always caused by war.

But ultimately this is a question of faith. Are we going to live by faith, or by sight? God’s first command was to be fruitful and multiply. I do not want to commit myself to quantifying what multiplication means, but I think it means having more than one or two children. Now even if it appears that we have enough people on earth, what are you going to trust – your own judgment, or God’s word? We too easily twist scripture to fit our own cultural values. I’m talking about evangelicals here – Bible-believing people. We criticize liberals and Catholics for misusing scripture, but we do the same – just on different issues. A life of faith consists of believing what God says and doing it. In addition to prayer and Bible study, Christian piety means having a lot of children.

The command to multiply children makes more sense when we remember it is followed by the command to rule the earth. Perhaps the reason evangelicals refuse to take seriously the command to bear a lot of children is that they also refuse to rule the earth. In its extreme form, some parts of the church are more focused on guessing when Christ will return than on working to rule the earth. Remember the example God gave us? God’s pleasure garden in Eden was the example of what the whole earth is supposed to look like. There is a *lot* of work to do! You and I can’t possibly do it all. We need all the help we can get. We *need* children to help subdue the earth. I don’t need children to work my farm or make my merchandise, but I need children to extend my rule over the earth. There is much to do. We need to rebuke unbelief in literature and create Christian literature. We need to develop Christian ethics in the sciences. We need to find technological solutions for the poor and undeveloped areas of the world. We need righteous lawyers, judges, and politicians. But I am only one man. I can’t do all this. On my own, I am severely limited in my ability to rule the earth for God. But what I can do is have children who can tackle these problems. Perhaps I will have a child who expands our technological abilities, and one who becomes a writer, and a politician, etc. If I train them to serve the Lord, they will extend my rule beyond my own capability.

So you see from this perspective a man or woman who cannot have children is severely stunted. Barrenness is a terrible humiliation. It means that in the central calling of life, you are impotent. So although Abram, Sarai, and Hagar did not handle Sarai’s barrenness right, at least their attitude about it was more Biblical than ours. It was normal that they should be distressed. We are the abnormal ones. We should be ashamed of ourselves for desiring few children. We should repent of our laziness and long to be fathers and

mothers. We should repent of valuing career and leisure more than children – and I am speaking of both men and women here. The problem is that children are exhausting and expensive. It's far easier to have a few children and work at a career than to have a quiver full of children. Lord, grant us repentance and give us the desire to have many children.

Submission and Authority

A third lesson we learn from this passage is submission to authority. We can hardly fault Hagar for running away. Sarai unjustly mistreated her. Some of us would have fled, too. But God instructed her to return to Sarai. Not only must she return, she must also submit to Sarai. "The Angel of the LORD said to her, 'Return to your mistress, and submit yourself under her hand.'" (Genesis 16:9) This is another of those passages in scripture which really stick in our craw. We *hate* submission. We long to be free. Children can't wait to escape the home so they can do as they please. Women no longer pledge to obey their husbands, and if your boss becomes demanding, you just quit. But now here is a clear case where God orders someone to submit to her authority.

The foundation to this command is that reality is hierarchical because God is a hierarchy. All three members of the Godhead are equal in power and glory, but there is a command structure. Jesus was very explicit that He does only what the Father tells Him, and the Spirit is sent by Jesus to do His will. When God created man in His image, a social-hierarchical nature was built-in. Now, man perverts this hierarchy. Sinful man uses his position to exploit others for personal gain. Although all people are equal in value and dignity, man uses his position to devalue and humiliate others. But these abuses do not render hierarchy itself useless or evil. Man abuses sex also, but you don't see many people rejecting sex because it has been abused. In a healthy society most people would find themselves at various times in positions of authority and submission. A man will be the head of his house, but subordinate to his employer. A judge will rule in the courtroom, but submit to the elders in his church. Godly people learn to rule with wisdom and compassion, and to submit with grace and faithfulness.

God is giving most of you many easy opportunities to practice submission this summer. If you are returning home, you will be under the authority of your parents. Will you submit to them willingly, or grudgingly, or not at all? Perhaps they are a bit out of touch, or even difficult. Remember Hagar. Godliness for her was serving a spiteful mistress. Are you in a worse situation? It may be difficult to wake up and come home when your parent ask. It may be galling. But you can do it. Life will go on, well actually. It may be annoying to do chores around the house, but it is the right thing to do. I think I must refrain from suggesting too many specific examples lest my children think I am using this as an opportunity to telegraph my desires to them, but you get the message. Submit to your parents. And as a Christian you could even show God's love to your parents by serving them in things they don't even request. Perhaps you could clean the car or vacuum the house for your parents without their asking. Remember Hagar. God is giving most of you an easy lesson in submission.

Finally, we learn the nature of authority. Everybody in this passage failed. Sarai lost faith in God, became angry with Abram, and mistreated Hagar. Hagar gloated over Sarai and then ran off. Abram collaborated in a faithless plan for children and allowed Sarai to mistreat Hagar. Everyone sinned, and everyone is responsible for his own sin. But responsibility for the family rests with Abram. Abram and Sarai do not share responsibility. He is the head of his house, and he will be held accountable for the household. Like Adam, Abram failed to correct his wife, and like Adam, he will live with the result of his sin.

God's Solution

We read a passage like this, and our hearts sink. Some of you come from broken or troubled families, and you know the pain of domestic conflict. What ever happened to the glorious promises God gave Abram when He called him to leave Ur in Mesopotamia? What happened to the man of faith who was

considered righteous because of his faith? What future does this family have? How will Sarai be reconciled with Hagar? And how will Abram and Sarai ever restore the love they lost? And what makes this story more depressing is that the characters deserved the misery they get.

And now we see the love of God, His faithfulness to His covenant. Although they didn't deserve it, God came and began to repair the damage. He appeared to Hagar, the one perhaps least at fault in the whole mess. God called her to account for her behavior, and to her credit, Hagar didn't blame anyone else. She took full responsibility for her actions. God told her what she no doubt already knew to do, to return home. Then He treated her very graciously. He gave her a promise similar to Abrams! God promised to give her innumerable descendants. Furthermore, as a husband to her, he named her child and gave her a prophesy of his greatness. Think – a slave girl! Being treated with such kindness and respect. Can you imagine any man treating Hagar this way? Can you imagine any other God but ours showing such love to such a humble person? Isn't God amazing?

I share James Boice's opinion that this encounter with God changed Hagar.¹ When she returned home Abram agreed to name her baby Ishmael, which I think indicates some healing in the family as a whole. The God of the impossible did it again!

Perhaps tonight has been rough on you. Perhaps you have realized you are a long way from serving God the way you ought. Perhaps you have been lazy and disobedient to your parents. Perhaps you keep refusing to wait for God, but insist on doing things your own way. Perhaps you realize you are too selfish to enjoy children. Perhaps you have been mistreated – or have been the abuser. God's word to you is that you must change, but God is with you. God *has not* abandoned you and *will not* abandon you because of your failure. No matter how often or how badly you fail, God will always stick with you. Furthermore, God is constantly taking failures and making them into godly successes. It may be impossible to imagine what can come of your life, but the God who does the impossible can make you into a man or woman of faith, like those “who through faith subdued kingdoms, worked righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, became valiant in battle, turned to flight the armies of the aliens.” (Hebrews 11:33-34) These were ordinary people made great by God through faith. Entrust yourself to this God, and may He change the world through you.

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¹ James Montgomery Boice, *Genesis Volume 2; A New Beginning* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker) 1995, p. 573.