

“THE GOD WHO HEARS AND SEES”

In the preceding chapter of Genesis, God explicitly told Abram that he would have a son for an heir. Then, in order to assure Abram that this promise would be fulfilled, he undertook a self-maledictory oath, calling down covenant curses upon himself should he fail to bring this promise to fulfillment. And the most noteworthy thing about that oath was that God undertook it entirely on his own. Normally, such oaths involved both of the parties who were entering into a covenant with each other. But in Genesis 15 it is only the Lord who walks through the animal pieces. God takes complete responsibility for fulfilling what he has promised. Even if Abram should fail to uphold his end of the covenant, even if Abram’s faith falters, God will see to it that his promise is fulfilled. It is important to have this in mind as we read chapter 16 of Genesis, because this chapter shows us yet another instance in which Abram’s fail does in fact falter. Once again we see that no sooner has the promise been made that its fulfillment is put in jeopardy because of Abram’s actions. We saw this in chapter 12, when Abram went to Egypt and his deception led to Sarai being taken into Pharaoh’s harem. And now we see the same thing again, as Abram and Sarai respond to the delay of the fulfillment of God’s promise by coming up with their own plan for how to produce an heir. What follows is a tale of the family strife that results from their actions. And the main lesson conveyed in all of this is that our expedient attempts to solve our problems are doomed to fail, because the Lord wants us to entrust ourselves to him, the one who hears and sees all things.

The passage begins with Sarai coming up with her own plan for how to provide an heir for her husband. Now there is much that the book of Genesis leaves unsaid here. How do you suppose Sarai felt when her husband told her that God had promised him a son? Keep in mind that this was a culture, like most cultures before our modern times, in which one of the things that a woman dreaded the most was the prospect of not being able to bear children. Sarai had lived with that reality for her entire married life, and she was now over seventy years old. And here is her husband telling her that God has promised him a son. We know from chapter 18 that Sarai found it too difficult to believe that God could provide a son through her, so she came up with her own plan.

This plan, strange as it sounds to us, was not unusual in the ancient world. Wives who could not have children of their own would sometimes use their servants as surrogate mothers, claiming the children that they bore to their husbands as their own. Sarai's plan would not have been seen as scandalous in her world. It would have been seen as a respectable thing to do.

It is not hard to see why Abram agreed to Sarai's plan. It had been ten years since he first came to Canaan. The delay in the fulfillment of what God had promised him was wearing on him. Sarai's plan seemed to make sense. I'm sure that we can all identify with how Abram must have been feeling. How quickly we grow impatient with waiting upon the Lord. We will wait for a time, but so often we end up taking matters into our own hands.

Now the text does not tell us explicitly whether this action was right or wrong. This is one of the challenges that confronts us as we read the Bible's the historical narratives. Very often, the actions of the biblical characters are simply described to us, without anything being said about the morality of their actions. But there are a number of indications in this text that make it very clear that Abram and Sarai were wrong to pursue this path of producing an heir. One such indication is the fact that Sarai's plan made such a mess of things. Hagar is contemptuous towards her mistress. Abram is caught in the middle. Sarai treats Hagar poorly. Hagar runs away towards her home in Egypt. This is not a picture of blessedness.

Another indication that Sarai's plan was wrong is seen in the words used to describe what takes place. The text says that Abram "listened to the voice of Sarai," and then it says that Sarai "took" Hagar and "gave" her to Abram. Now we have heard this kind of language before in the book of Genesis. We heard it in the account of the fall, when Eve "took" the fruit and "gave" it to her husband, and when Adam was rebuked by God for listening to the voice of his wife. Moses, the author of Genesis, is presenting the actions of Sarai and Abram in this passage as a type of fall. They had just been given a great promise from God, a promise sealed with an oath, and now they pursue their own plan for bringing about the happiness that they desire. In adopting the plan of producing an heir through a surrogate, they were adopting worldly methods. As Paul shows in his letter to the Galatians, the birth of Ishmael stands as an example of self-effort in religion. That is the meaning of Galatians 4:22-23: "For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a

slave woman and one by a free woman. But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born through promise.” Isaac’s birth was the fulfillment of God’s promise, while Ishmael’s birth was a result of Abram and Sarai taking matters into their own hands.

As I said earlier, the plan of expediency pursued by Abram and Sarai produced negative results. Hagar grows to despise Sarai, which results in Sarai’s harsh treatment of her, which results in Hagar fleeing from her. But what happens next in the story is not what we would expect. Our familiarity with the story can cause us to overlook this, but if you stop and think about it, the events that take place after Hagar flees from Sarai really are surprising. Hagar is not the one through whom God’s promise to Abram will be fulfilled. This has yet to be stated explicitly, but it will be in the next chapter. Hagar is not the one through whom the covenant line will be continued. Nevertheless, the angel of the Lord appears to her in the wilderness and promises to multiply her offspring as well. God does not abandon her. Her offspring will not enjoy the blessings of the covenant, but they will enjoy common grace blessings. In Hagar’s own words, God looks after her.

And this points us to the key idea in this chapter: the idea that the Lord is an ever-hearing and ever-seeing God. The angel instructed Hagar to name her son Ishmael, a name that means “God hears.” He said, “You shall call his name Ishmael, because the LORD has listened to your affliction.” And then there is the name which Hagar gave to the place where the Lord met her. She called it Beer-lahai-roi, which means “You are a

God who sees me.” The God who met Hagar in the wilderness is the God who hears and sees human troubles.

This was what Abram and Sarai needed to see. It was what could have prevented them from pursuing their own plan for producing an heir. They needed to realize that the God who called them out of Ur, the God who had made such great promises to them, this God is not a distant God. He is the God who hears and sees everything. The Lord taught them this lesson in this passage, and he did so through an unlikely messenger, through Hagar. How do we know that? How do we know that Hagar told Abram and Sarai what had happened to her in the wilderness? We know it because it was Abram who named his son Ishmael. Abram named his child “God hears.”

Once again, God proves himself worthy of Abram’s trust. Once again, he sorts out the mess created by Abram’s attempts to obtain what God had promised him. In the end, God showed Abram that he hears and sees his people. Even in Abram’s failure, God continued to watch over him. As we have seen before, Abram’s faith was weak. It was mixed with doubt and disobedience. So is ours. And this is why we can find such great comfort in a passage like this. God’s continued faithfulness to Abram, despite his failures, teaches us that our confidence does not reside in the strength of our faith, but in the God in whom we trust.

This point was powerfully illustrated by a friend of the southern Presbyterian Robert Lewis Dabney. It was near the end of Dabney’s life, and Dabney had written his friend a letter in which he expressed his fear that he might not have enough faith to face death.

Well, his friend wrote back to him and used an illustration to make an important point. He asked Dabney to imagine a traveler who came to a great chasm over which a bridge was spanned. Here is the way he puts it in his letter:

“What does he do to breed confidence in the bridge? He looks at the bridge; he gets down and examines it. He doesn’t stand at the bridge-head and turn his thoughts curiously in on his own mind to see if he has confidence in the bridge. If his examination of the bridge gives him a certain amount of confidence, and yet he wants more, how does he make his faith grow? Why, in the same way; he still continues to examine the bridge. Now, my dear old man, let your faith take care of itself for awhile, and you just think of what you are allowed to trust in...Think of what he has done, his work. That blood of his is mightier than all the sins of all the sinners that ever lived. Don’t you think it will master yours?...May God give you grace, not to lay too much stress upon your faith, but to grasp the great ground of confidence, Christ, and all his work and all his personal fitness to be a sinner’s refuge. Faith is only an eye to see him.” [cited in Gordon, *Why Johnny Can’t Preach*, 76-77]

Faith is like being willing to walk over the bridge. Your confidence in the bridge might waver once you get on it, but the thing that matters is not the strength of our confidence but the strength of the bridge itself.

As you and I walk as pilgrims through this life, we are continually reminded of the fact that we are pilgrims, that we have not yet received the kingdom that has been promised us, at least not in its consummated form. We experience many trials, many problems, many disappointments. It can sometimes seem as though the Lord is slow in fulfilling his promise. But instead of coming up with our own solutions, God calls us to wait upon him, to place our confidence in him. And in this text he assures us that he is like a sturdy bridge; he is completely worthy of our trust. He hears all. He sees all. God was not surprised by the fact that Abram and Sarai had not yet had a child. He was not waiting for them to come up with an ingenious strategy to overcome their childlessness. And the same is true for us. God is not surprised by any of the trials that you and I are facing. The Lord knows what you are struggling with. He does not want you to come up with your own way of overcoming these things. He wants you to keep on trusting in him. And you can be certain that he will hear your cries for help. For he always hears, and he always sees.