

Genesis 16A (2011)

A pastor was conducting street evangelism among the down-and-out of the inner city, when he walked into a pub one afternoon and said to the first man he met, "I'm a pastor and I want to know do you want to go to heaven?"

The man replied, "I certainly do, Pastor"

The pastor said, "Then wait over there by the door."

Then the pastor asked a second man, "Do you want to go to heaven?"

"Of course," was the man's reply.

The priest said, "Then join the first man by the door."

Then the pastor walked up to a ragged, tired-looking man and said, "You look like someone who needs hope...do you want to go to heaven?"

The man's eyes opened wide and he said, "Oh no, not me."

The pastor said, "I don't believe this. You mean to tell me that when you die you don't want to go to heaven?"

The man said, "Oh, when I die, yes. I thought you were getting a group together to go right now."

- As the saying goes, timing is everything
- Timing can also be key to understanding God's will
 - God operates on a timeline that is often completely different than our expectations
 - Sometimes His call or direction comes too early, sooner than we expected
 - Other times we feel He's late
 - When we feel God's timing isn't to our liking, it's usually a sign that we're not walking at His side
 - We're out of step with the Lord in where He's going and what He's at work accomplishing
 - There are times when He expects us to move quickly and times when He asks us to wait
 - And our willingness to move and to wait according to His direction are tests of obedience

- In the story of Abram we've seen him demonstrate faithful obedience
 - He has shown obedience both through action and by waiting
 - He acted in faith when he left Ur under God's direction and entered Canaan
 - He showed obedience in his willingness to wait for the arrival of the heavenly city of God, the promised land
 - Foregoing any claim to the land under his feet in the meantime
 - On the other hand, Abram isn't perfect, and at times he has demonstrated disobedience
 - He's demonstrated disobedience by acting when he should have been waiting
 - As when he went to Egypt during the famine rather than waiting on God to provide
 - And in lying about his wife Sarai, calling her his sister, rather than waiting for God to protect him
 - And in Chapter 16 today we find Abram sinning again in acting too soon
 - And he sins by waiting when he should have taken action...action to guide and counsel his wife
 - Often the greatest test of our obedience isn't in our willingness to act, but in our willingness to wait on the Lord

Gen. 16:1 Now Sarai, Abram's wife had borne him no children, and she had an Egyptian maid whose name was Hagar.

Gen. 16:2 So Sarai said to Abram, "Now behold, the LORD has prevented me from bearing children. Please go in to my maid; perhaps I will obtain children through her." And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai.

Gen. 16:3 After Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Abram's wife Sarai took Hagar the Egyptian, her maid, and gave her to her husband Abram as his wife.

- It's been ten years since Abram and Sarai left Ur and entered Canaan in response to God's call
 - When they left Ur, Abram was 75 and Sarai was 65 years old and they were childless

- They were already past childbearing age, even in a day when people were living into a second century
- And now after ten years, they remain childless and things look bleak
- After ten years of waiting for an heir, Sarai decides that something must be done to correct the problem
 - In v.2 she tells Abram that God is preventing her from having children
 - In Hebrew, Sarai says the Lord is restraining her bearing children
 - And what she says is true
 - God has made Sarai barren for the time being
 - We'll see Scripture tell us later that God opens Sarai's womb at an appointed time
 - But for now, God has blocked childbearing for reasons of His own
 - We'll understand those reasons in a future chapter, but for now, it's enough to simply acknowledge that God is in control
 - But what Sarai failed to do at that point was ask God why, and trust God to bring an answer
 - Instead, Sarai decides to take matters into her own hands
- Sarai has heard all the same promises that Abram has heard
 - She knows that God has declared Abram will have a countless number of descendants
 - She knows that the children must come from Abram, since God said it would be an heir from Abram's own body
 - But God has said nothing about who the mother will be
 - Since Abram is married to Sarai, the natural assumption should have been that Sarai would be the mother

- But after ten years of waiting for this promise to be realized, Sarai is beginning to wonder if she has made a bad assumption
- Perhaps the child is supposed to come from another woman?
 - Here again, Sarai could have sought the Lord for an answer
 - Or she could have sought her husband's counsel for confirmation
 - Sadly, she does neither
- Childlessness was considered the worst fate possible in the ancient world
 - In ancient culture, childlessness was understood to be a curse from God; a judgment against the marriage
 - Usually, the woman bore the blame and received the scorn for the lack of children
 - It's still a source of despair for many couples today, since one of the greatest joys for a marriage is to witness the birth of new life
 - In Abram's day, the laws of the culture permitted men to obtain additional wives especially when the couple was childless
 - If the first wife didn't produce after a while, the man could elect to take a second free woman as a wife
 - In fact, in some cultures the barren wife was obligated to provide her husband a surrogate wife to bear children
 - The second wife would be equal in standing to the first wife
 - Obviously, this new arrival in the family became a competitor with the first wife for the affections of the husband
 - And the two wives shared equally in the inheritance
 - Since a barren wife had no desire to share her husband with a fertile wife, there arose a second method for obtaining a child in ancient times
 - A barren woman could offer her husband one of her own slave girls as a concubine

- If the husband agreed, he would consummate the marriage with the concubine, making her his legal wife for life
- But because the concubine was also a slave owned by the first wife, the concubine did not have the same status as a true wife
 - She was a second-class wife
 - She was still a slave and did not receive an inheritance
- More importantly, her children would be considered the children of the free wife
 - So the barren wife would no longer be considered barren
 - The concubine would never have any children of her own, since every child would be considered the offspring of the first wife
 - And the first wife remained the master of the concubine
- So concubines were essentially child producing slaves
 - Since the slave wife was still the property (handmaiden) of the free wife, she must obey the orders of the free wife
 - According to law, she could never be sold because she was a wife
- This is the solution Sarai chose for Abram and herself
 - Rather than sharing Abram with a second wife, Sarai preferred to supply her handmaiden as Abram's concubine
 - This preserved her status as Abram's only free wife and ensured that any child born would be considered Sarai's child
- Sarai offers Abram her handmaid Hagar
 - Sarai received Hagar while Abram was in Egypt
 - We remember Egypt is a picture of the sinful world in Scripture, so Hagar herself becomes a picture of sinfulness

- Hagar means to flee, as in a fugitive fleeing, reminiscent of their departure from Egypt
 - It will also carry prophetic meaning for Hagar personally
- As we said, Sarai and Abram were following customs of the day
 - There was nothing immoral about this plan, at least according to the society
 - But while it might not have been immoral according to human law, that doesn't mean it was in keeping with God's purposes or expectations
 - The question of God's view of polygamy has been debated throughout the ages
 - The debate usually centers on the major Biblical characters who are seen to have concubine wives
 - Besides Abraham, we see Jacob, Caleb, Gideon, Saul, David, and Solomon all taking concubines
 - Solomon raised it to an art form
 - So some have concluded over the centuries that multiple wives is something God permits
 - This conclusion is faulty for four reasons
 - First, Scripture records numerous men having multiple wives, but recording an event isn't equivalent to endorsing the behavior
 - The Scripture records Jacob lying to his father
 - David committing adultery
 - Saul practicing divination
 - And Solomon permitting idolatry
 - We wouldn't draw a conclusion that these behaviors are permitted simply because other men sinned in these way
 - Likewise, we can't draw the conclusion that multiple wives was God's plan simply because some men made this mistake

- Secondly, in every case where Scripture records multiple marriages, it portrays the experience in a negative light
 - This chapter shows the consequences of Abram's sin
 - Later Scripture will show us the sin of Jacob's multiple marriages
 - And likewise, the downfalls of Saul, David and Solomon are clearly connected to their taking multiple wives
 - One commentator said:

"A thousand volumes written against polygamy would not lead to a clearer fuller conviction of the evils of that practice than the story under review."

- So the only fair conclusion we draw from the examples we do have in Scripture is that polygamy leads to bad things
- Thirdly, the practice of multiple wives didn't begin with an instruction from God but from the decision of a particularly sinful man, Lamech
 - Remember, it was Lamech who was seventh from Adam in the ungodly line of Cain who first decided to take multiple wives
 - If the practice of polygamy was the invention of ungodly immoral people, then we can hardly conclude it was according to God's desires
- Finally, Scripture's specific teaching concerning the nature of marriage is abundantly clear
 - A man shall leave his mother and father and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh
 - There is simply no room in the theology of the Bible for a husband to share himself with multiple wives
- So Sarai (and Abram) are making a mistake, one permitted under the culture but not in keeping with God's desires
- How did they rationalize this decision, since God had not directed this step?
 - It was probably quite easy

- They had been childless their entire marriage
 - And now they've been promised a child by God but it's been ten years since the promise
- The only conclusion Sarai could draw was God has prevented her from having children (v.2)
 - So, she concludes, it must mean Abram was to receive the child some other way
- We can easily imagine what she told herself:
 - "God provided us with Hagar when He blessed us in Egypt, so Hagar must be God's provision to us so we can have an heir..."
 - After all, ten years is a long time to wait
- Have you entertained similar thoughts?
 - "Surely God wants me to have _____?"
 - "The fact that He hasn't given it to me so far is just proof that He wants me to get it some other way..."
 - Who are we kidding? Only ourselves
 - The fact that we don't have something is proof that God doesn't want us to have it, at least not yet if ever
 - Trying to obtain it some other way is sin
- Abram and Sarai are acting out of impatience and a failure to trust in God having made no attempt to seek God's will over the matter
 - More than anything else, it's Abram's failure to reach out to God that is most striking
 - Look in v.2 at Abram's response
 - Here's a man who has heard from God personally in three separate occasions
 - He knows what it's like to receive instruction from God
 - Yet on a matter this important, Abram simply listens to the voice of his wife
 - Why not lift up a prayer asking for confirmation?

- There are many ways in which our faith is supposed to drive us to live differently, but none are more important than in the way we make decisions
 - When the world makes decisions, it weighs options and evaluates outcomes relying entirely on human wisdom
 - We can employ similar methods
 - But in the end, we're supposed to be Spirit-led and God fearing
 - And if we make our decisions listening to the Lord's instructions, that will undoubtedly lead us to live a life different from the world
 - So we shouldn't be surprised when we're not following the world's patterns
- Unfortunately Abram, we're told, listened to the voice of his wife, and took Hagar as a second wife
 - Often God will frustrate us when we try to go around Him and obtain something outside His will
 - He will deny us what we are trying to gain, despite our best efforts to obtain it
 - But the truly frightening thought is that sometimes He lets us have what we want even though it is not His desire, just to teach us a lesson
 - And in Abram and Sarai's case, God does that very thing
- Hopefully you can see some parallels to our earlier study in Genesis 3
 - In that chapter we heard a similar statement by God when he disciplined Adam
 - God said because you listened to the voice of your wife...
 - Like Adam and Woman in the Garden, Abram and Sarai heard a promise from God
 - But rather than listening to the voice of God, the wife took matters into her own hands
 - And as before, the husband took the wife's instruction over the Lord's

- And the result was a great sin
 - Now let's be completely clear about what Scripture is teaching here
 - The lessons is NOT that husbands shouldn't take their wife's counsel
 - The lesson is that BOTH husband and wife should heed the Lord's counsel
 - But ultimately the responsibility lies with the husband to ensure the family is walking in the will of the Lord
 - Here is where Abram should have acted rather than remained passive
 - He should have counseled his wife against this end
 - But Abram failed this test
- Each time Abram makes a sinful choice, his actions bring consequences
 - But because Abram is so central to God's plan, each sinful choice Abram makes brings history-changing consequences
 - For example, his decision to go to Egypt resulted in his wife acquiring Hagar
 - And now Abram's decision to marry Hagar, an Egyptian and not a woman of God's choosing, produces long lasting consequences
 - The first consequence shows itself almost immediately

[Gen. 16:4](#) He went in to Hagar, and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress was despised in her sight.

[Gen. 16:5](#) And Sarai said to Abram, "May the wrong done me be upon you. I gave my maid into your arms, but when she saw that she had conceived, I was despised in her sight. May the LORD judge between you and me."

[Gen. 16:6](#) But Abram said to Sarai, "Behold, your maid is in your power; do to her what is good in your sight." So Sarai treated her harshly, and she fled from her presence.

- Hagar finds herself with child, and immediately the problems begin
 - It's not hard to imagine how Sarai must have felt as she contemplated her maidservant pregnant with Abram's child

- For decades, Sarai had wanted nothing more than to have a child, to do away with the scorn of barrenness
 - And though the culture blamed her, perhaps in the back of her mind Sarai wondered whether Abram was to blame
 - Perhaps it was Abram who was unable to father a child
- But now the answer was obvious to everyone: she was barren, not Abram
 - But at least the child would be considered hers and Abram would finally have an heir
 - But then Sarai sees the joy in Hagar's face, and Sarai's jealousy begins to grow
- Then one day Hagar gave Sarai that "look"
 - Maybe Sarai sensed pity in Hagar's eyes, or maybe it was a wry, knowing smile from Hagar
 - A look that communicated more than words could
 - Sarai realized Hagar, the slave, despised her own master
 - In Hebrew, the word is also translated contempt
- This was more than Sarai could take, so she goes to Abram and protests
 - Sarai places the blame for Hagar's haughtiness directly at her husband's feet
 - Does Abram truly bear the blame here?
 - In one sense, no
 - Abram didn't originate the idea
 - He merely agreed to Sarai's proposal
 - On the other hand, Sarai is correct
 - Abram had the leadership role in the family and should have anticipated this outcome
 - His first wife now had a slave woman that couldn't be sold and now felt free to show her mistress contempt

- Hagar knew that she had special status as Abram's wife, though she remained a slave
- Sarai feels hurt and powerless
 - And she tells Abram that God will judge between them
 - God will determine who has made the bigger mistake
 - I suspect God will blame Abram, not Sarai
 - This is the full meaning of headship
 - The point is not who has the earthly power in a marriage
 - It is who must endure the heavenly accounting for family sin
- Finally, Abram compounds one sin with another
 - When confronted by his wife, Abram is dismissive and reminds his wife she may do what she wants with Hagar, since Hagar is still her slave
 - So Sarai treats the Egyptian harshly, which means to mistreat her
 - This is a cruel and thoughtless response by Abram for Hagar's sake
 - Hagar is a victim here
 - She is Abram's wife and still due respect
 - And since she carries Abram's child, God will protect her as he promised to do for Abram's heirs
 - And Abram and Sarai will see consequences for their sin on this day