

SUNDAY, JUNE 06, 2010

## Sunday, June 6, 2010: Giving God a Hand

Giving God a Hand  
Genesis 16: 1 – 16.

### I. Introduction.

In 1995, a Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania man named McArthur Wheeler was arrested for bank robbery. He walked into two banks in broad daylight and robbed them at gunpoint. He thought he got away with the cash, but he was arrested later in the same day. The police sat him down and showed him the surveillance tapes. It was clearly his face on the tapes.

Wheeler couldn't believe they had his face on tape. He was wearing a disguise. The problem was that his disguise didn't work. He didn't wear a traditional ski mask or a mask of a dead president or even heavy makeup. Instead, Wheeler had covered his entire face with lemon juice. He thought that lemon juice would make him invisible to the security cameras.

I think McArthur Wheeler's story could fall into at least two categories. He might be an example of a "dumb criminal." Or, he could be an example of a person who had an idea that seemed like a good idea...But it didn't turn out so well.

"It seemed like a good idea at the time," is not a good excuse. But it does explain a lot of the things we do.

A woman in my first church told me that her son once asked her to make him a sandwich. She asked him what kind of sandwich. He answered, "Ham and mustard with peanut butter and jelly." She asked him why. He said, "My two favorite sandwiches are ham and mustard and peanut butter and jelly. I want to put my two favorite sandwiches together." (I don't remember the rest of the story, but it was probably one of those "it seemed like a good idea at the time.")

Do all of your good ideas work out exactly as you thought they would? Probably not. Most of the pain and disappointment in our lives can be traced back to ideas that seemed like good ideas at the time.

In my personal experience, this is usually the difference between doing things God's way versus doing things my way. Or, allowing God to work in my life versus trying to give God a helping hand.

### **Read Genesis 16: 1 – 16.**

Genesis 16: 1 rewinds the Abram story back to where we were last Sunday. In Genesis 15: 2, Abram complained to God about not having any children and started working on a contingency plan. Abram's contingency plan was to name his servant Eliezer as his rightful heir. But, this was not God's plan. God said that Abram would have a son "from his own body" to serve as heir to his estate.

This was a terrible situation for a man in the ancient world. There was no such thing as Social Security or a 401 (k) retirement plan. Children were the only retirement plan available. If Abram had no children, then he had no one to take care of him in his old age, and he was already 86 years old. This situation is even worse when we take into consideration that God promised Abram descendants that would be as numerous as the sands of the earth and stars in the sky.

Ten years. That's how long it has been since God first made his promise to Abram. That's also the accepted amount of time for a man to wait on his wife to provide him with children. In fact, it was acceptable grounds for divorce. If a woman could not have children in ten years, the husband was free to divorce her or to take a second wife.

Now, it was Sarai's turn to complain to God and work on a contingency plan. Sarai's plan was different from Abram's. It was different, because it took seriously God's word that Abram's heir would be a son from Abram's own body. It was also different because they acted on Sarai's plan.

Abram's wife Sarai had a slave named Hagar. We don't know much about Hagar, except that she was Sarai's slave and that she was from Egypt. It is very probable that Hagar was one of the slaves Abram and Sarai had acquired from Pharaoh when they went to Egypt to escape the famine in Canaan.

Abram's sojourn to Egypt was a tragic story about doubting God's promises. God told Abram that he would bless him with numerous descendants and that God would use Abram's descendants to serve as a blessing to all the peoples of the earth. God had a plan for Abram and his family. All Abram had to do was trust God and follow God's plan for his life. But, Abram took matters into his own hands.

When famine struck the land of Canaan, Abram took his wife Sarai to Egypt for safety. Sarai was a beautiful woman, and Abram feared for his own safety. If the Pharaoh wanted to take Sarai as his wife, he would abduct her and kill her husband. But, if Pharaoh thought Abram was Sarai's brother, then Abram would be richly rewarded as Pharaoh would pay Abram to take Sarai as his wife. So, that is exactly what they did.

The Pharaoh of Egypt paid a large sum to take Sarai as his wife. Genesis 12: 16 tells us that Pharaoh gave Abram "sheep and cattle, male and female donkeys, menservants and maidservants and camels." More than likely, Hagar was one of those female servants Abram received from Pharaoh. Her presence was a constant reminder of the time Abram and Sarai had doubted God's promises. And, now she plays a prominent role in another occasion for doubt.

## II. Helping God Is a Compromise with the World.

From a purely human standpoint, Sarai's plan offered an acceptable solution. In the Ancient Near Eastern world, there was a precedent for a man taking a second wife to provide him with an heir. But we need to remember that worldly solutions are not always what God wants for his people.

Notice how Hagar's status changed twice in **Genesis 16: 3 – 6**, "**So after Abram had been living in Canaan ten years, Sarai his wife took her Egyptian maidservant Hagar and gave her to her husband to be his wife. He slept with Hagar, and she conceived. When she knew she was pregnant, she began to despise her mistress. Then Sarai said to Abram, "You are responsible for the wrong I am suffering. I put my servant in your arms, and now that she knows she is pregnant, she despises me. May the LORD**

**judge between you and me."**

**"Your servant is in your hands," Abram said. "Do with her whatever you think best." Then Sarai mistreated Hagar; so she fled from her."**

In the beginning of verse 3, Sarai was Abram's WIFE and Hagar was Sarai's MAIDSERVANT. At the end of verse 3, Hagar was Abram's WIFE. Her status had changed. She had been elevated from slave to wife. She had been elevated from Sarai's inferior to become Sarai's equal. This is what caused the problem with Sarai.

It seemed like a good idea at the time. But, now that Sarai had an equal in the family structure, she also had a rival. So, for the second time, Sarai voiced a complaint. Her first complaint was against God. Her second complaint was against Abram. Sarai never took responsibility for her action. It was her idea—not Abram's idea—to seek alternative means for having a son.

Abram is not innocent in this scenario. He committed adultery by taking a second wife.

In verse 6, Abram changes Hagar's status a second time in order to keep the peace in the family. Sarai gave Hagar to Abram to become his WIFE. Abram gave Hagar back to Sarai to become her SERVANT again. It was the right thing to do, but the damage to Abram and Sarai's relationship was already done.

This is one of several Old Testament examples of men who took a second wife. Sometimes we read biblical stories like this and wonder if taking multiple wives was an acceptable practice in the Old Testament. Well, it wasn't an acceptable practice. It was acceptable to the world, but it was not acceptable to God.

There are no positive examples in the Bible of a man having more than one wife. Solomon—the son of David and the last king of united Israel—had hundreds of wives. But, these wives led Solomon and the people of Israel into idolatry. Jacob's father-in-law tricked him into marrying the wrong sister. As a result, Jacob's life was filled with strife and rivalry among his twelve sons.

Abram and Sarai had received a promise from God. God would give them a son. They would have numerous descendants. They would become a great nation. God would use them to bless "all peoples of the earth." But, ten years seemed too long to wait. When they tired of waiting, they decided to give God a helping hand.

Again, from a human point of view, Abram and Sarai didn't do anything wrong. They had a son by a surrogate mother. It was acceptable. It was legal. Everyone understood...Everyone, that is, except God.

Sometimes we make the same mistake. Instead of waiting for God to fulfill his promises to us, we compromise with the world and try to give God a helping hand.

We try to help God find us a husband or wife by compromising God's standards of sexual purity.

We try to help God get us through school by cheating on tests.

We try to help God bring justice in the world by attacking other people.

We try to help God by becoming judgmental Christians, who insist on pointing out the flaws and mistakes in other people.

We try to help God bless us by gambling, playing the lottery or adopting questionable / illegal business practices.

We try to help God grow the church by compromising the message of the Gospel.

We try to help God grow the church by adopting worldly gimmicks to attract people to the love of God, which needs no gimmick.

We try to help God grow the church by insisting on doing things our way instead of praying for God to bring revival.

Ultimately, Jesus has a word for us in the Model Prayer in **Matthew 6: 9 – 10**, **“Our Father in Heaven, hallowed be your name, (let) your Kingdom come, (let) your will be done on earth as it is in Heaven.”**

The Kingdom of God and the will of God are two things you and I have no control over. We cannot bring the Kingdom of God to earth, and we cannot manipulate God’s will. All we can do is pray that God will do the work of establishing his Kingdom on earth and that God will accomplish his will on earth. On one hand, that makes us feel very helpless. On the other hand, it should make us feel liberated! God takes full responsibility for bringing about his Kingdom and his will. If God made the promise, only God can fulfill the promise!

### **III. Helping God Is Like Playing God.**

In Genesis 16, Sarai reminds me of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3. Remember what Eve did when God confronted her with her sin? God asked, “Why did you eat from the forbidden fruit?” Eve answered, “The serpent tricked me.” God asked Adam, “Why did you eat from the forbidden fruit?” Adam answered, “The woman YOU made for me gave it to me.” They didn’t think it was their fault. At least, they tried to blame it on someone else. Eve blamed the serpent. Adam blamed God.

In verse 2, Sarai introduced the idea of using Hagar to bear a son to Abram. In verse 5, Sarai blamed Abram for the conflict and rivalry.

But there is another parallel in **verse 3**, **“So after Abram had been living in Canaan ten years, Sarai his wife took her Egyptian maidservant Hagar and gave her to her husband to be his wife.”**

Sarai did with Hagar the same thing Eve did with the forbidden fruit. First, she TOOK Hagar. Then, she GAVE Hagar to her husband.

Remember Abram is not innocent in this story. He committed adultery and almost split his family. And, I am not in any way trying to say Adam was innocent. Adam knew firsthand that God had forbidden the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. He was tempted, but he ate the fruit of his own free will.

More than likely, the author of Genesis wants us to remember the story of Eve in Genesis 3. He doesn’t want us to blame the women more than the men. He wants us to notice how this is exactly like what happened to Adam and Eve. It was a sin!

The serpent's words to Eve show us what sin really is: "you will be like God." This is the reason we sin and the result of our sins...We don't want to be LIKE God... We want to BE God.

Faith is never easy. It wasn't easy for Eve in the Garden of Eden. It wasn't easy for Abram and Sarai. And, no one has ever promised it would be easy for you and me. The hardest part of faith is waiting on God.

Faith is believing the unseen promises of God more than the circumstances we can see.

Faith is being persistent when persistence runs counter to our common sense.

Faith is allowing God to work his will and establish his Kingdom when we are tempted to give God a helping hand.

This is the biggest mistake we make as Christians. We tell God what we are planning to do and ask him to bless our plans. "These are my plans, God, please bless them." "This is my choice, God, please bless it." It is better to ask God what to do than to tell God what you're going to do.

#### **IV. Conclusion: Can I Mess Up God's Plan for My Life?**

Abram and Sarai did everything in their power to "mess up" God's plans for their lives. In just a few weeks, we will learn that Ishmael was not the son God promised them. We will also see that God's promises are fulfilled and God's plan for their lives comes to pass. But, in the meantime, we are left to wonder...Can I mess up God's plan for my life? Is it possible to make a choice that takes me outside of God's will?

In the story of Abram, Sarai and Hagar, we see God's plan in jeopardy. The only way God's plan gets back on track is when God sent an angel to intervene. This is the good news today. Yes, you and I can mess up God's plan. Yes, we can make choices that take us outside of his will. But, God will never let us go. God continuously intervenes in the circumstances of our lives to save us from our ideas that seemed like good ideas at the time.