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THE PROBLEM WITH BEING GOD'S ASSISTANT Genesis 16:1-6

We had the great privilege of having a vacation recently that lasted two weeks. Because we did not have unlimited space in our luggage we could not pack enough clothes to last the entire time. That meant we either had to wear stinky clothes or we had to do laundry at some point. Near the end of our trip we stayed at a terrific hotel that provided free laundry rooms for guests. The washers and dryers were free and the hotel provided laundry soap. So at the end of our first day there we did our laundry. We got our clothes in the washer, put in the soap and turned it on. Later I told Laurie that I would take care of putting the clothes in the dryer so she could just relax and enjoy being on vacation. Normally Laurie handles the laundry management in our family. Being the loving husband that I am I chose to help out. I took the bull by the horns and headed back to the laundry room to transfer them from the washer to the dryer. After some study I was able to figure out the controls to the dryer, dumped the clothes in and fired it up. Laurie was quite appreciative of me taking the initiative and getting that done, allowing her to just relax. I felt pretty good about serving my wife and helping her out.

Later there proved to be a small fly in the ointment. When I went back to get the clothes out of the dryer even though it was stopped they seemed awfully hot. As it turned out they were maybe a little too hot. One of my favorite pairs of shorts and one of my favorite shirts had shrunk. Laurie was very gracious about it. She actually apologized to me saying, "This is really in my area of expertise, I should have handled the laundry." If you extrapolate that out to its corollary that would be, "you shouldn't have." My desire to help Laurie was commendable, but the results were lamentable. That same thing happens when we decide to help God out. When we figure he needs our help running things in this world and we pitch in to solve something he seems to be having trouble with the results will likely be lamentable. We will see an example of this in the lives of Abram and Sarai today as we look at Genesis 16:1-6, and hopefully we will learn from it.

ABRAM AND SARAI CAME UP WITH A PLAN

We saw in the last chapter that Abram was guaranteed by God that he would have a son. Abram had some doubts that God put at ease. Unfortunately the doubt problem didn't end there. In chapter 16 we see that there is still a problem. It had been 10 years since they had been given the first promise that they would have a

son, and still they are without a child. God had once again guaranteed a child, had even signed a contract promising to give them a child. But there was still no child.

Back then being childless was more than a painful loss like it might be today for many. That can be a terribly painful loss for couples today. But in Abram and Sarai's day it was much worse. *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* says "To be a wife without motherhood was regarded in the east not merely as a matter of regret, but also as a reproach and humiliation."

What were they to do when they had done everything they could and nothing had worked? There were no fertility doctors to consult, so they had few options. Their culture had an option to offer that we see in verse two. Sarai suggested to Abram that he have a child by her servant girl who was named Hagar.

It is hard for us to imagine a wife suggesting that her husband sleep with another woman as Sarai does in verse 2. To me that seems like a terrible idea. However, in that day and that culture that evidently was standard operating procedure. The code of Hammurabi is an ancient Babylonian law code that dates back to the time of Abram. At one point that law says, "when a free man marries a priestess and she gives a female slave to her husband she has then borne children." That shows that the practice of the day was that a woman could claim as her own a child her husband fathered with her servant girl. A neo-Assyrian text from a few centuries later stated it even more clearly. Referring to a woman named Subetu it says, "if Subetu does not conceive she may take a maid servant as a substitute in her position. She will thereby bring sons into being and the sons will be her sons."

In case you're not clear on this let me point it out that while this might have been a custom of their culture, it was not any part of God's plan. In Genesis 2 it was very clear that the man and woman, the two of them, should become one. There was no room in there for a third party for any reason. Jesus would later explicitly say that. There are a lot of things that will show up in the Old Testament that God's people will do that are contrary to God's plans. This is one of them. Abram and Sarai believed God's promise, but they decided that he apparently needed them to help him fulfill it. They had to solve the problem of no child for him.

THE PLAN LED TO PROBLEMS

God always has good reasons for what he tells us to do. What happened between Abram and Sarai is a case in point. God knew that the relationship between a husband and wife should be sacrosanct. He knew that if one party violates the sacredness of that relationship it will create problems. People will get hurt.

We see that in this chapter. What should Abram have done in this situation? We will cut him some slack because we have more information about what God's will is today than he had. However the ideal for him would have been to respond to his wife's suggestions by saying, "I know that many of our friends are doing that, but our relationship is special and holy before God. There is no way I will sacrifice that relationship, even for a goal as noble as having a child. We will trust that if Almighty God wants to give us a son, he will do it."

It is entirely possible that even had Abram taken that stance that his wife would have fought him on it. As already mentioned, for her being childless was more than just sad. It was humiliating. She may well have said that she didn't care what it took, she wanted a child. So if that meant Abram had to sleep with her servant then so be it. Still, God has called husbands to lead in the home. It was Abram's job to insist that they do things God's way. Instead, he was passive and agreed, maybe all too eagerly, to go along with the plan. The results were predictable.

Hagar did indeed become pregnant. Verse four tells us once that happened she began to despise her mistress. It's not hard to understand why that happened. She had been the servant, the low woman on the totem pole. She was regarded as an object to be used for the masters' purposes. But now the tables have turned. She had accomplished what her mistress was unable to do. She had become pregnant and was going to give Abram a child. Didn't that make her more important than her mistress? It certainly did in her eyes, and it probably did in Sarai's eyes as well. Not only had Sarai's husband slept with this woman, now every time she looked at her she could see a smirk on her face. She knew exactly what Hagar was thinking. She probably felt like everyone, including her own husband, was thinking the same thing. It was downright intolerable.

Dealing with Hagar's pride and superior attitude hurt so bad that Sarai became irrational. In verse 5 she says to Abram, "you are responsible for the wrong I am suffering." Let's go back to verse two. Sarai said to Abram, "go sleep with my maid servant." She said it. It was her idea. Abram showed remarkable restraint by not saying, "hey back the truck up there woman. May I remind you that this was your idea from the start?"

Perhaps he was aware that such a response might well be like trying to douse a fire by pouring gasoline on it. Poor Sarai was hurting. The situation was painful and humiliating for her. And now Hagar was pouring salt into that wound every time she saw her. I have no doubt that somewhere in her mind she knew that this was

her idea. But what comes out in verse 5 is pure emotion. She is just lashing out in her pain.

Abram from beginning to end in this episode pretty much abdicates his responsibility. All he does in response to his wife's outburst is to say to her "do whatever you want." He doesn't try to help solve the problem. He doesn't seek to help her be a little more rational, maybe because he felt that was a fool's errand. He doesn't admit the problem and seek to rein Hagar in and let her know that her attitude is unacceptable. All he does is wash his hands of the situation. He just bailed out. When Abram essentially bailed out and walked away from the situation it gave her license to treat her former servant however she wanted. So verse 6 tells us she began to mistreat her. We don't know what form that mistreatment took. However, whatever it was it was harsh enough that Hagar finally decided she could take no more. She ran away to escape Sarai.

The mistreatment must have been quite severe. Despite the fact that Hagar was pregnant she fled out into a pretty harsh environment with no way to support herself or protect herself and her child. She was willing to go to that extreme to get away from Sarai. She felt conditions in Abram's home were unbearable. So unbearable that she would put herself and even her unborn child at risk to get away from it. We're going to leave Hagar right there in the wilderness today. You will have to come back next week for the sequel to find out what happened to her. Today we will consider what we can learn from Abram and Sarai.

IMPLICATIONS

THEY DID NOT BELIEVE WHAT GOD SUPPLIES IS ENOUGH.

Abram and Sarai took the step we see in this passage because they didn't think God could fulfill his promise without their coming up with a solution for the failure to get pregnant. They felt it was up to them to solve the problem, so they hit on a very human solution that totally violated God's will. Their failure was caused by two factors: First, they did not believe that God could keep his promise purely using his divine power. Second, they operated according to the thinking of their culture.

God had been promising a son to them for 10 years and there was still no sign of said son. In chapter 15 that Abram was already searching for alternatives. Maybe his servant was going to be the person who would inherit his estate. They were looking for options because after 10 years of trying to have a child with no success it was pretty obvious that the normal procedure was not working and was not going

to work. What would you think? To make matters worse they were getting along in years and their chance of having children naturally was diminishing.

What would make anyone think that God was going to supernaturally grant them a child now when nothing had happened for 10 years? While God had spoken to with them in some supernatural form, they had seen no evidence of his divine power prior to this. There had been no other miracles. Abram was aware of God's great help when he defeated the invading kings back in chapter 14. But that was not overtly miraculous. So it would never have occurred to them that God would do something utterly out of the ordinary.

There was a lever that opened the door to their failure to trust in God's sufficiency. That lever was their desire for a child. They wanted a child so badly they could taste it. It mattered to them more than almost anything else. It was as if they operated by the premise, "well we have to have a child so what must we do to get one?" Do what everybody does!

Recently while we were on vacation Laurie and I did some snorkeling. A couple of days before we did so a tiger shark was spotted a little ways off the beach where we were staying. This was a little unsettling. However, there had been no sign of the animal for several days so we felt it was safe to go into the water. This was especially true since we were about ½ mile or more from the place the shark was sighted. However while we were in the ocean I was very much aware that I was not in a place that is natural to human beings. The ocean is not our home. Sure, we can swim in it, or surf in it or snorkel in it. But it is not our native environment. It is the native environment of turtles, eels, fish, and yes, sharks. As I swam around looking at fish and turtles I was very much aware of the fact that this is their home not mine. I sometimes wonder if those sea creatures don't look at me and think, "dude, what are you and why are you here?" As much at home in the water as sea creatures are they do not appear to be aware of their environment. At one point I was watching a young sea turtle that was swimming only a few feet away from me not very far from shore while there was a fairly significant swell running. I could feel the pull of the swell as it shoved me back and forth. I watch this little turtle as he was carried backward and forward by the swells very near coral encrusted rocks. He didn't seem to mind at all. To him it was all natural and normal. I fought the swell to stay in position, but he just floated along calmly. I was very much aware of the ocean environment, but to him it is just where he lives. It is how life is. I say this to remind you that something similar happened to Abram and Sarai and it happens to us. Just like that little turtle was not aware of his environment, which seemed perfectly normal and natural to him, so we tend to not

be aware of our environment. It seems normal and natural to us. By that I mean our culture is so pervasive, so ever present and so normal to us that we don't notice its effect on us. Abram and his wife came up with a plan that was totally foreign to God's way of doing things. Even to us it seems a bizarre plan. But it was what everybody in their culture did. At least everybody who was in their situation. It was just assumed if you were in their situation that was how you would deal with it. It probably never occurred to them that there was anything wrong with their plan. It was just what everyone does.

Recently I happened to look at some pictures from Laurie's and my honeymoon. We looked a lot younger. However, it wasn't our youth that I noticed most while looking at those pictures. The thing that stuck out to me was the shorts I was wearing. They were so short! It really looked bad. I look at those pictures now and think why did I ever wear such a thing? Why didn't I notice that they were clearly an offense to the natural order, a definite sin against the human race? How come I did not see how wrong that looked? The reason I did notice was that's just what guys wore back in that day. It was what everybody wore. It is embarrassing to see those pictures today. But those shorts seemed absolutely normal in our first year of marriage because that was the norm in the culture in which I lived. It is only when you get outside that culture that you can see bad fashion for what it is. My point here is that our culture impacts us all of the time in ways we are not even aware of. It happened to Abram and his wife and it's happening to us right now.

WE CAN MAKE THE SAME MISTAKE

The big mistake that Abram and Sarai made was to fail to believe that God could fulfill his promise. They did not believe that what God would supply would be enough. We do the same thing in a variety of ways.

We think it is up to us to make ourselves acceptable to God. When I think I have to be more holy, more religious, read the Bible more, pray more, have more victory over sin, have more faith, or be more consistent in order for God to truly accept and love me, I am not believing that what God supplies is enough. God says by putting my faith in Christ I am totally accepted and loved. Yet we easily fall into the trap of thinking we have to do something more.

In 2 Corinthians 12:9 God told Paul "My grace is sufficient for you." So the question for us is do we believe that God's grace truly is sufficient? Colossians 2:9-10 says we have the fullness of God in Christ in us we are complete in him. Ephesians 2:8-9 says we are saved by grace through faith, "and that not of yourselves, it is a gift of God." When you receive a gift do you have anything to do

with it? No, you just receive it. So is our acceptance by God a gift that is not of anything we do. Unfortunately it is all too common for us to fail to believe that is really true. We start to think that we have to help God out. And that is exactly what Mr. and Mrs. Abram did.

Another way that we fail to believe that what God supplies is enough has to do with a sense of our worth. All of us have a deep need to believe in our own value and worth. God tells us we are precious in his sight and of such great worth to him that he sent his son into this world to rescue us. To be infinitely valued by God is all the worth we need. But somehow we find ourselves feeling like what God supplies is not enough. Somehow we have to prove our own worth. We have to help God out. We try to prove that we have great worth because we are talented or intelligent or beautiful or witty or wealthy or famous. Everyone else in our culture is trying to do that by being successful, being famous, making a lot of money, looking better or being smarter than others. And so doing we make this a mistake in a different form that Abram and Sarai made.

We think it is up to us to convince people to believe in Jesus. We have to save them and get them into the kingdom of God. A number of years ago in a different ministry we had a speaker who came to address our men's group. He was a very dynamic guy. He had a business background. In his talk he pointed out that we in the church have the greatest product in the world. The message of salvation through faith in Christ is powerful and is needed by every human being. He then said our product is not selling at a level commensurate with its desirability. He then applied logic to that dilemma. He said if we have the right product and it is needed by everyone and is not selling as well as it should be, then the only conclusion one can reach is that there is something wrong with our marketing. The premise was that we are not doing a very good job of presenting the project and of packaging. It must be because we aren't living the way we should and proclaiming the message as we should.

In other words it is our fault that the gospel is not selling better. This is a big time guilt producer and a trap that is easy to fall into. On our way home from vacation Laurie sat next to a woman on the airplane that she engaged in conversation. Laurie was puzzled when the woman said that she doesn't have a job. She is doing a lot of traveling as a single woman. How could she afford that? The woman told her that her husband was a helicopter pilot in the army and that he was killed when his chopper was shot down in Afghanistan in 2011. She received the life insurance money so that she has enough to live on without working. Obviously it was a sad story. But what made it even sadder was it became apparent as Laurie talked to her

that this woman is running. She is looking for something. She was quite talkative. In fact, Laurie was able to get very few words into the conversation. It consisted almost entirely of her asking questions of the woman and listening. I could not hear all of their conversation but what I heard made it clear to me that Laurie did a masterful job of caring for this woman. But afterward Laurie struggled with doubt. She felt she should have said more. She should have tried harder to tell this woman about Jesus.

All of us understand that feeling. We have this burden of feeling like it is up to us to help people get into the kingdom of God. We forget so easily what Jesus said in John 6:44. He said, “no one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.” God has to work for anyone ever to come into his kingdom. We see a different slant on this same idea in Ephesians 2:5. “God made us alive with Christ even when we were dead and transgressions.” Here’s the question, can we do anything to make a dead person come to life?

Clearly we cannot. The Father must draw people to Jesus. God must make spiritually dead people come to life. Those things are utterly out of our control. They are far beyond our ability. My point here is that once again we see that it is what God supplies, and only what God supplies, that can bring people to faith in Jesus. When we think it is up to us to be great sales people with impeccable lives and unassailable arguments for the faith we are saying what God supplies is not enough. He needs us to help him out.

This same problem in fact crops up in regard to success of ministry as a whole. In most books and magazines aimed at pastors there is a common theme. It is important to make the church grow, and in order to do that you must have the right program, the right leadership style and the right methods. If that is true then where does success in ministry come from? It is up to us! I think someone should start a church consulting group and call it Hagar Ministries. God needs our help. He needs our programs. He needs our leadership, our charisma, our clever methods.

But hold on, isn’t it true that some of these methods, some of these programs, and great, dynamic leadership produce results? It is a common theme to point to some leader’s great success and his megachurch as evidence that programs or the methods or the leadership style clearly must work. It seems undeniable. So how are we to answer this? We answer by asking another question. Did Abram’s and Sarai’s efforts to help God out produce results? The answer is they most certainly did. A son was born! Clearly through Hagar they accomplished their goal. They had a son. Their efforts produced, visible, undeniable results. But you can see the

problem can't you? They accomplished their goal, but they did not accomplish God's goal.

I have no doubt that there are programs, methods and systems we can employ that will inevitably produce results in the church. They may be visible, undeniable results. Unfortunately, because we are depending upon our cleverness, our ability, our wisdom or our systems rather than upon God all we can be sure of is that we will accomplish our goals. There is no way we can know if those are in fact God's goals. They likely are not. 1 Corinthians 3:7 says God causes the growth of the church. Jesus said the gates of hell will not prevail against his church. He said that the gospel would spread throughout the world. He would see to it. The question is, can we actually believe that or do we think he needs our help?

God has promised to supply all our needs. Well sure, but he needs my help right? And so I'm going to work absurd hours to make my company a success or to climb the corporate ladder. I may have to neglect my family, my faith, and even my own health to do it, but I believe it is up to me. When we do that we are making the same mistake that Abram and Sarai made. God needs our help. What he supplies will not be enough so I have to make up the difference.

APPLICATION

PAY ATTENTION

We need to be aware of several things:

We need to be aware of our own desires.

Abram and Sarai desired to have children. This was a good thing. It was a Godly thing. It was not wrong in any way. In fact God had promised it to them.

Unfortunately there is a subtle shift they made and we can make without even noticing. We shift from desiring the good thing to thinking it is more than a good thing, it is a necessity. I have to have it. Then the only question is how can I get it? If God's not giving it to me I have to find a way to get it for myself. Hello Hagar.

In Ephesians 4:22 Paul said our old life was being corrupted by its deceitful desires. Those desires are not necessarily bad. They could be the desire for a son. They deceive us by telling us the only way we can ever be whole, ever really have life is by having them. Then the only question is how can I get it for myself?

What is it you desire? What do you want so badly that if God doesn't give it to you then you will have to go get it for yourself? Those desires aren't wrong, but they are dangerous. They open the door to failing to trust what God supplies.

We need to be aware of our culture's impact.

Our culture is impacting us. We are all influenced by it. What does our culture say? All that matters is that you be true to yourself. We are totally about individualism. When our culture asks about your net worth it is asking about money. That's no accident. It believes life is about money. It is essentially a naturalistic culture that doesn't really believe in the spiritual. Anything supernatural is superstitious and doesn't apply in the real world. Our culture says the only wrong is to call what someone does "wrong." It says the most important part of your identity is your sexuality and that the only hope of real freedom and fulfillment in life requires the totally unfettered expression and experience of sexuality however you desire. It tells us a person's value derives solely from what they can do and produce. It says looking good and young is the best thing you can have. It says this life right now is all we have, so we must live to get the good life right here right now or we've wasted our only chance. These ideas are flooding us continually. We need to see how they subtly pull at us and sway us in our thinking..

We need to be aware of fruit

Depending on the translation you use you will encounter a number of references to the flesh or the sinful nature in the New Testament. The flesh is the principle that what God supplies is not enough and it is up to me to get what I think I need. Abram and Sarai operated by the flesh in this chapter. They set out to do whatever was necessary to get what they felt they needed. Look at the results. There was conflict between Sarai and Abram and then between Hagar and Sarai. There were broken relationships.

In Galatians 5:19-21 you will see a list of what I would call the fruit of the flesh. Live by the flesh and this is what it will produce. Some of it is extreme. Drunkenness, idolatry, witchcraft, debauchery. But note the list includes discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy. Do you see any of that in Genesis 16? That is exactly what you see. That is what you will always see. Whenever you see jealousy, discord, envy, anger, selfish ambition, you can be sure someone is operating out of the flesh. If you see it all around you what's the common denominator? It's you! It's time to see where you are living by the flesh and change your ways.

UNDERSTAND THAT LIVING BY GRACE IS AN ART

You say that Abram and Sarai should have depended on God to provide the child they longed for. They erred in trying to help God out. But didn't they have to help God out no matter what happened? We all know there was something Abram and his wife had to do in order for there to be a child. They had to do what humans

always have to do to produce children. Could God have circumvented that normal route? Yes, he did so once in the case of Messiah. But in every other case God has a role for the humans to play. So didn't it make sense for them to take what was in their culture the next logical step? Unfortunately, that was a step too far. It violated God's will. Their mistake was in taking on responsibility of guaranteeing the outcome.

Living by grace can be difficult for God always has a role for us to play. The problem is how do we know when we've crossed the line from performing our role to failing to trust God to provide and trying to help him out with our efforts and schemes? While there are most certainly some boundaries, as we shall see, there are fewer hard and fast lines drawn than we might wish.

When have we stepped over the line between playing our God designed role and trusting what he supplies on the one hand, and helping God out using our own cleverness on the other? Living by grace is an art, not a science. Most of the time that's not a line at all, it's a fuzzy boundary. So we need to learn to develop the art of listening to God, having complete trust in what he supplies and staying on the right side of that boundary.

There is one thing we can do to help us do that. It is:

MAKE FAITHFULNESS YOUR FOCUS

Put your focus continually on being faithful to God. Had Abram said, "being faithful to God as a husband means guarding the sanctity of our relationship. No way will I violate that," this entire episode would have been avoided. The problem was he got his focus off of being faithful to God and onto controlling the outcome. He had to have a son, so that became the priority, not doing God's will.

When it comes to success in ministry, worth, making money, winning people to Christ and a whole lot more, what we need to focus on is not so much the outcome we desire but the process of just being faithful to God. We can leave the outcome to him.

KNOW WHAT GOD SUPPLIES IS ENOUGH

Ephesians 3:20 says God is able to do immeasurably more than all we can ask or imagine. The Greek word translated "immeasurably" is a powerful word. The root of it means "abundantly" or "exceedingly." But Paul tacked two prepositions onto the word. One of them strengthens it, as though meaning "more than exceedingly." The second means "beyond" so, "beyond more than exceedingly."

The best dictionary of New Testament Greek says it means the highest comparison possible. In other words, beyond any ability to measure.

So this says God has the ability to do beyond any ability to measure more than anything we can ask, but more than that, more than we can even imagine. If you can dream it up, God can do so much more than you can think of that you can't even measure it.

But I've asked God for some pretty far out things and he hasn't given them to me. Is he unable? No, he can do infinitely more than I ask. Maybe he just doesn't care? No, he loves us infinitely. Then why doesn't he give it to me? It is because he loves me, and he knows that no matter how much I think whatever I ask is absolutely essential for me, it is not what I need. Suppose our future granddaughter, Leilani, when she is 2 asks grandpa for a piece of candy instead of lunch. Am I able to give it to her? Yes, I am able to give exceedingly more than that. If I refuse is it because I don't care about her? No, far from it. I may refuse because I know what she needs is a nutritious lunch. What she will need to do at that point is trust that what grandpa supplies is enough.

Many of you know Mike and Kim Fox, who are missionaries our church supports. Kim was diagnosed with serious cancer earlier this year. I wrote an email to them to express my sympathy and to try to encourage them. But as sat at the computer I felt completely inadequate for that task. What do you say? I formulated one thing after another in my effort to say something helpful and one after another I rejected the ideas. I could not think of a single thing to say that didn't seem empty or trite. I prayed asking God to help me. Eventually I gave up. I wrote some things that were pretty generic, thinking that the most important thing was that I let them know we were hurting for them and praying. Honestly I felt what I wrote was the very definition of lame given the gravity of the situation. I sent it off asking God to somehow use it to help them even though it was so very shallow. Last month they were in town to visit and they asked to have lunch with us. We talked for some time with them, but then Mike said, "One of the main reasons we wanted to meet with you today is I wanted to share something with you." He said that one day they were particularly discouraged. God had given them a particular passage of scripture that they were hanging onto for hope and strength. But this day it seemed those words were not coming true and he was feeling hopeless. Mike had prayed, "Lord, help me believe this." Right after that, he said, he saw they had an email from me. He read it, and in that email I used the exact phrase from that passage that they had been holding onto though I was totally unaware of the passage. He said it gave them a huge bolt of encouragement. He said it was like God saying, "I

hear you, Mike, and here's the evidence that I am with you in this." From my perspective it was just a coincidence. I could never have manufactured that kind of encouragement for them by anything I said or did. But God took my little nothing, and that's truly what it was, and turned it into something. God supplied enough.