

Genesis 16 - Running Ahead of God

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People often ask, “How do you know that the God of the western civilization, or the God of America is the one true God?” It has escaped them that the one true God is actually the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God’s redemptive program for all of mankind started with Abraham. Genesis is not about the creation account, instead, 39 out of 50 chapters are about Abraham and his family. It was written by Moses, after he led the Hebrews out of Egypt, to answer all their questions like—Who are we? How did we get here? What is our future?

God sovereignly chose one man Abraham to come out of the pagan idol worshipping rebellious world to have a relationship with the one true God. The Lord blessed him, and made him great promises of land, many descendants, and that one of his descendants would be a blessing to the whole world (Jesus). Abraham became the father by blood of two races of very important people—the Jews and the Arabs, but spiritually he is the father of all who believe according to Paul in Galatians 3:6-9, “it is those who are of faith who are sons of Abraham.” (see also Romans 4:16). Why Abraham? What did he do, or why did he merit such favor from God? He was originally a pagan idol worshiper, he was a deceitful liar down in Egypt, and he was originally only partially committed. God chose him for no reason that we can understand, except to reveal that all people have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and the blessings were only by God’s grace. Therefore God is consistent. God saved Abraham just like He saved you and I—lovingly, mercifully, and graciously.

Testing the Faith of Abraham

We are told in Hebrews 11:8-9 that Abram was called by God to go to the unknown land that God would show him, and by faith he went. Nevertheless, when we read the story in Genesis 12, we must wonder at what point are we told that he was saved? In Genesis 15:6 we are first told that “Abram believed God, and God reckoned it to him as righteousness”. When you commit yourself fully to the Lord according to God’s truth, you enter into a faith-based relationship in which God declares you not guilty, forgiven, righteous, and eternally saved. In his epistle, James asked and answered the question of how we know that Abraham was saved. In James 2:21-24, he quoted the Genesis 22 story about when Abraham offered up his son Isaac on the altar as the proof that Abraham was saved. This was the biggest test of Abraham’s life, and the sure proof of his total belief in God. Therefore, we are told he believed God in Genesis 15 and it is proven in Genesis 22. In fact, Abraham endured at least seven major tests of his faith from Genesis 12-22. Through these tests we can see his progression of faith as he passed the first one partially, failed the second, passed the third, and failed the fourth. The fourth test of patience, or waiting on God, had major consequences that changed the world we live in, and has historical significance, which started with Abraham’s family but continues until now. It is the reason it costs \$80 to fill up your gas tank. One of God’s repeated promises to Abraham was that he would be the father of many descendants, and one of those descendants would be a blessing to the whole world. In those days being childless and without an heir brought great shame, and so naturally Abraham and Sarah were losing patience since they were getting older and past the child bearing years.

The Brood Mare Strategy

In Genesis 16:1, we read that at an advanced age, Sarah was still childless, and at that time ran out of patience. Their problem tempted them to look for a human fulfillment. After all, doesn’t God help those who help themselves, and don’t the ends justify the means? To humans, both of those worldly arguments sound biblical, but in fact are not. A cultural practice of that time period now had an appeal to Sarah. We can get insight into this cultural practice of using slaves to birth children for their masters who are barren by consulting the ancient “Code of Hammurabi”. These are well preserved clay and stone tablets with laws in Babylon governing religion, business, slaves, and conduct. It dates back to just after the time of Abraham. In this code were provisions for a master’s right over his/her slave to conceive and bear children for the master’s benefit. Having come from that Mesopotamian area, Abraham and Sarah would have been very aware of these laws and practices. Even though they certainly must have realized that God’s promise of many children was meant to apply to Sarah as the mother, they now see that as improbable, and decide to help God out by using Sarah’s Egyptian servant Hagar.

In Genesis 16:2, Sarah plays the blame game to justify her actions. She blames her problem on God, “the Lord has prevented me from having children”, therefore she asks Abraham to “go into my servant...I shall obtain children through her.” This

reasoning is consistent with human nature beginning with Adam when he blamed the original sin on God when he tried to shift the blame by saying to God, "This woman who you gave me, she gave me the fruit". The truth is that we all want what we want when we want it, and can play that rationalization game when we need to. We as students studying the story realize that God is testing their faith by delaying the promise of children. When God finally gave them a son there would be no doubt that it was entirely a miraculous gift of God. Sarah and Abraham act on their desires, and cease waiting on God. Thus they will not accept the circumstances that God gave them, so they RAN AHEAD OF GOD. Can you, by your actions, take or obtain what God has promised to give you? All through the Bible we read that all glory should go to God, and there is no reason for any of us to boast before God. The brood mare strategy to use Hagar was a fine human scheme that would have dire consequences.

One theologian said it this way, "Solving problems is simple, but living with solutions is difficult". In our day, pro-athletes are being caught cheating and become disgraced all the time. An aging baseball player suffering from injuries solves his problems with steroids and HGH---problem solved, but later gets caught and a guy who would have been a cinch for the Hall of Fame is then excluded. Every time people mention his name everyone groans thinking about the cheater who is now disgraced. Abraham's descendants have suffered from the consequences of his sins for 4000 years. In a sense, that is what this fallen world we live in is—a place where we live with the consequences of sin forever (until Christ comes back).

In Genesis 16:4, Hagar conceived and immediately all the relationships changed. She went from a servant to a rival of Sarah. I have it in my mind that Hagar was young and attractive, and that helps to explain why Abraham was so willing to embrace the brood mare strategy. But now Hagar's pride welled up and she saw the chance to advance herself, and soon Sarah and Hagar despised each other. In v.5-6 we see the classic husband-wife conversation with finger pointing and blame. Try to view this situation from God's point of view. They all deserve an immediate whipping, but what God did was to allow them to live with the consequences forever. You would think Hagar would have had more sense than to despise Sarah and think she could replace her. Her pride was like the flea on the elephant who after they crossed a bridge said, "Wow we sure shook that bridge!" Someone needed to tell her "Never insult an alligator until after you crossed the river." Sarah began treating her so harshly that Hagar fled for her life. In Genesis 16:7-12 we read that God graciously came to her via His messenger, and showed her great mercy and encouragement. The future of the Middle East is predicted in God's blessing on Hagar. If Hagar would return and submit to Sarah then Hagar would have a son and greatly multiply her descendants through him. She was to name her son Ishmael, which means "God hears" and has paid attention to her affliction. In Genesis 16:12 we get insight as to the nature of Hagar's son and his descendants, "he will be a wild ass of a man, and he will contend against everyone and vice versa, and he will live to the east (of Canaan)". This was probably an image referring to the wild nomadic donkeys of that time, and so the descendants of Ishmael would be a stubborn, warlike, contentious, nomadic race. In Genesis 25:12-18, we are given more information about Ishmael and his sons. Ishmael had twelve sons, and each would form his own tribe and settle in Arabia in defiance of all his relatives. These twelve tribes would contend with Israel, but also each other. The twelve tribes of Ishmael became a spiritual antithesis to the twelve tribes of Israel. My own interpretation of this prophecy is that Ishmael and his descendants would be a warlike nomadic people who would harass Israel for the rest of history. It appears that the sovereign God has set up these two half brothers, Isaac and Ishmael, to be the fathers of two opposing nations of people in the Middle East. Every day for the rest of history Abraham and his descendants were reminded how Abraham ran ahead of God, and the lesson is there for us as well. His sin was forgiven, but the consequences live on. Little did Abraham and Sarah imagine that their running ahead of God would originate a conflict that would go on perpetually and that so much blood would be spilt.

When I first read this I wished I could have had a time machine so I could go back in time and intervene, but the truth is that it was inevitable. As long as people live independent of God according to their own desires, they will always run ahead of God.

The Sign of the Covenant

Thirteen years passed after Hagar gave birth to Ishmael, and Sarah still had not conceived. The tendency would have been to forget God's promises, as each year would have increased the possibility of Sarah having a son. God did not forget, and in Genesis 17, God repeated His promise. That was the fifth time God had repeated the promise. In chapter 17, God used the term "covenant" thirteen times. God was putting great emphasis on the certainty of the coming miracle. It was here at the age of 99 that God changed his name from Abram (exalted father) to Abraham (father of a great number). Abraham's new name served as a reminder of His guarantee of a legitimate heir. God also provided a sign of the covenant by commanding that all males in Abraham's family be circumcised. God was establishing a visible sign and seal of His promises. We know now that there are sanitary and health reasons for circumcision, but the purpose of God was to give them a visible sign. Every day when they did their business they would remember. It would also be a very personal sign as to the daily testimony to the individual that God would bless them, and not to be shown to people in general. The Scriptures also use circumcision as a symbol of a surgical removal from the sins of the flesh with the idea that God has cut away or separated His people from sin. Paul gave us added insight to this in Romans 2:25-29. Paul wrote that circumcision only has value if you obey and follow God, and shocked His audience by saying, "For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, neither is circumcision that which is outward

in the flesh.” Abraham, and all who believe, have an inward belief and reverence for God of which circumcision was a sign.

Paul’s Metaphor in Galatians 4

I love it when the New Testament interprets the Old Testament for us. In Galatians 4:21-31, Paul interpreted the Isaac-Ishmael story and applied it to all of us. In the allegory, Paul likens Ishmael as a child born according to the flesh, and Isaac represents the child born according to the promise of God. Isaac stands for what God promised and gave—God’s grace; but Ishmael represents man’s own efforts or works to be fulfilled without God. Therefore we as believers and recipients of God’s grace are spiritual descendants of Isaac, but all those who are trying to be saved by their own works are children of Ishmael. Isaac was born by God’s gracious promise, but Ishmael was born when Abraham and Sarah tried to take things into their own hands. We also, being saved by grace and having received it by faith are now children of the promise, while all who are trying to be saved by their own works and merit are children of the flesh.

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