

A Wild Donkey

Genesis 16:1-16

“God helps those who help themselves.” Where is that in the Bible? Is it in Proverbs? Or maybe the Psalms? Maybe Ecclesiastes? There are lots of things are in Ecclesiastes.

Actually, it’s not anywhere in the Bible. “God helps those who help themselves” is not in the Bible at all. In fact, that expression is entirely untrue. That expression, though commonly spoken and sometimes even an expression of appreciated encouragement to people, is actually a rather dangerous misunderstanding of God and of his relationship with his people. More accurately, the statement should say, “God helps those who are absolutely desperate in their hopeless inability to help themselves!”

However, our text this morning is a passage in which Abraham acts in a way as if he seemed to believe that “God helps those who help themselves.” Abraham has believed God’s promise--of immeasurable land and uncountable descendants. He has received the gracious confirmation of that promise from God in the form of that covenant ceremony we studied last week.

But in chapter 16, still believing that God’s promise is true and will be fulfilled, he gives in to the temptation of trying to devise a human solution, a natural solution, to bring about that which God had promised. Specifically, ten years later, he and Sarah still don’t have any children. Eliezer, the servant from Damascus, wouldn’t be the promised heir. Abraham understood that. But who would be?

Well, as they reasoned in their own mind, if the heir wouldn’t come from Sarah’s womb, which to them was quite obviously the case by that time, maybe Sarah’s maid servant Hagar could bear

a child to be Abraham’s heir. It would, after all, be his legitimate son. And in that culture, in that day, such an arrangement was very common and perfectly acceptable. And unlike the entrance into Egypt when Abraham suggested that Sarah identify herself as Abraham’s brother in order to be taken and protected by another man as his wife, this time Sarah came up with the idea.

v.1-2

Now, the difficulty in interpreting this is to properly evaluate what actually happened. I think that it is fair to say that both Abraham and Sarah had proper motives. You could debate that some, but it appears that they both wished to see the blessing of God’s promise fulfilled, and they both believed that it would happen. To that extent, they were acting properly in accord with their faith. They hadn’t lost their faith. They didn’t deny their faith.

However, what they did, even if from the motivation of faith, was wrong. The way they went about it was wrong. Taking the matter into their own hands was wrong. They violated the sanctity of their own marriage—again. Their error, their sin, is repeated frequently in lives of Christians today. It is the error of resorting to human ingenuity and natural means when supernatural intervention is called for. In other words, it is the error of depending on your own strength instead of depending upon God’s strength at work within you.

Any of you ever catch yourself doing that? What we see here is that,

I. GOOD MOTIVES DON’T ENSURE PROPER ACTIONS.

This plan was wrong. It was improper. It was sinful.

Yet still,

A. Sarah demonstrates genuine faith.

Now, how can that be? Well, look at it closely. She understands something rather significant, that the Lord gives children and the Lord withholds children. The ability and opportunity to bear children is entirely a matter of God's providence and will. Thus Sarah ascribes her inability to have children to the Lord. She's not blaming God, and there is no sense of anger or frustration or disrespect. Just the truth.

v.2a "See now, the LORD has restrained me from bearing children."

"The Lord has restrained me, prevented me, withheld from me. He has closed up my womb." Still, at the same time, she believes God's promise. They would have a child. So she suggests to Abraham that her maid-servant Hagar be impregnated.

Now, in a real sense, this was a genuine act of selfless love, demonstrating great self-denial. Sarah is praised as a godly submissive woman, so submissive even in this circumstance that she is willing to give up her sole right to her husband's affections. She submitted to her station in life, and suggested a plan which to her must have terribly painful and grievous. She was willing to do it because God said that they would have a child, and if she didn't believe that promise, she never would have considered this plan to see it fulfilled. Her desires were good, for she wished to build a family, an honorable and praiseworthy desire for any woman.

So I want to say that her motives were good. Her intentions were right. But there was a serious problem.

B. Sarah's method of seeking God's blessing was sinful.
v.2a

I have no doubt that Sarah was considering herself to be

seeking after and following God's will for her life. She believed, by faith, along with her husband, that they would have uncountable descendants. She no doubt sensed that this particularly painful act of self-denial was precisely what God had called her to do. But she failed to search God's law.

Oh, how many people do that today. Sincerely, eagerly, selflessly desiring to be obedient to God and to his will, we act on impulse, on emotion, on subjective ideas of revelation. Instead of conforming our lives to Scripture. We get a good idea in our minds, and we forget to ask God if it is, indeed, a good idea. We act without praying, without giving thought to God. And so often, like Sarah, our ideas and plans are terribly flawed.

Everything we need for life and godliness is found in Scripture. And however deep your subjective sense of God's revelation, however strong is your feeling that you are doing God's will, if you fail to work to conform your life to his revealed word, you are in great danger. Great danger of sin.

In that regard, sometimes we try to separate motivation from action, and actually excuse sinful behavior on the basis of good motivation. We explain away rather awful behavior sometimes by saying, "Oh, his heart was in the right place." "His intentions were good." Yet we need to avoid thinking that the spirit of the law somehow cancels the letter of the law. Good intentions don't always produce righteous behavior.

But surely we need to avoid the opposite error, as well. Good actions with wrong motives is sinful, too. So we must work diligently to avoid the external legalism or self-righteousness, so characteristic of the Pharisees, who receive such strong rebukes from Jesus:

Matt. 23:23 "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees,

you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices —mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law —justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. 24 You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel. 25 “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. 26 Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean. 27 “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men’s bones and everything unclean. 28 In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.”

Jesus didn’t tell the Pharisees to stop their outward actions which were good. Rather, he rebukes them by saying that, “You have neglected the more important matters of the law —justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. Good intentions do not justify sinful behavior.”

Behavior must be an attitude of the heart, but it must also be outward conformity to the revealed will of God. We should never play one against the other. In this instance, we should not justify Sarah’s actions on the basis of her motivation. Even with good motivation, we can still sin, which is precisely what Sarah does.

And Abraham agreed to it. He certainly doesn’t come off very well here, either. Despite the fact that this arrangement was a common experience in that culture, Abraham should have recognized it for what it was. He should have recognized and honored his wife’s selfless love, and then identified and rejected

the inherent sinfulness of what she suggested. And he should have refused to go along with the idea. He should have protected her, guided her, taught her, and love her.

He did no such thing. We read simply that “Abram heeded the voice of Sarai...So he went in to Hagar, and she conceived.”

I always call that response the passive male. Just going along with the flow, failing to demonstrate real leadership and the appropriate strength and responsibility of one given a position of loving authority. Abraham just went along, likely not even thinking about the consequences. But something becomes immediately obvious.

II. SINFUL ACTIONS BRING INEVITABLE CONSEQUENCES.

Bad consequences. We see what happens in, v.4b-5

No matter how selfless Sarah’s motivation may have been, still the sinfulness of the plan would bear its own evil fruit. I would identify first the strained relationships, relationships harmed by emotions which so naturally result from this sinful situation. Despite the fact that Sarah’s desire may have been praiseworthy, still, a woman can’t live with her husband’s affections being given to another woman. And she shouldn’t have to! That’s what marriage is all about!

At the same time, the woman who was the object of Abraham’s affection, couldn’t be expected to receive his affections at one moment, then have him return to his wife in the next. Conflict is inevitable. The reality which is shown so clearly here is that,

A. Sinful actions will cause damaging emotions.

And damaging emotions is a nice way to describe what we have here. This sinful arrangement provoked all sorts of evil fruit--jealousy, envy and strife. Hagar began to despise Sarai.
v.4b

God had bestowed upon Hagar that which he withheld from Sarah, and that wouldn't have been missed on either of them. Hagar is provoked to look down upon her mistress, to think lightly of her, to despise her in the sense of emphasizing her barrenness.

Sin produces these harmful emotions, for sin itself is harmful. No good will come from it, as naively as Sarah thought she could endure this plan she had conceived. Sarah responds with understandable emotion, even to the point of blaming Abraham for the humiliation of her own situation.
v.5

Hagar's resentment toward Sarah provokes Sarah's resentment toward Hagar, and even toward Abraham, blaming him for what she had suggested. Don't you see how sin always produces more sin! Hagar's wrong leads Sarah to do further wrong. The sin grows more and more involved.

Any plan of man that contradicts the revealed will of God will inevitably bring about such terrible consequences. You just can't escape it. I'll not be any more specific than that, but pray that the Holy Spirit would let each of you identify that pattern when it grows in your own lives. Sin produces more sin. And sinful action will cause damaging emotions.

Then what happens? What happens when a relationship is strained by the damaging emotions of fear, jealousy, and envy?

Conflict.

And the conflict often takes the form that it does here, namely, that the system of authority which God has established for various relationships will be strained.
v.6-9

B. Sinful actions will strain God's system of authority.

Let me explain that a little bit. Abraham responds first by reminding Sarah of appropriate relationships, namely that her maid servant is just that, her maid servant.
v.6a

Abraham is not suggesting cruelty to Sarah, nor condoning it, just reminding her of the situation that exists. Hagar is under Sarah's authority. So what does Sarah do?
v.6b

Now, the word "dealt harshly with her" has the basic meaning of simply exercising authority, which is not necessarily harsh nor mean-spirited. Sarah was in her right to remind Hagar that Hagar was under her authority. But that authority, that relationship, is now strained by sin. Strained terribly. So the implication of the context is that Sarah's exercise of authority did become harsh, and Hagar did despise and chafe under it. So much so that she left. Hagar fled from Sarah.

Because of the sinfulness of the situation, not only was the relationship between Sarah and Abraham strained, but so was the relationship between Sarah and Hagar. And God actually intervened to reconcile the relationship in the proper context of authority.
v.7-9

“Return to your mistress, and submit yourself under her hand.” Go back and surrender to her authority, for that would be the right thing to do! God says to Hagar, “Go back and restore that relationship which had been so strained by the sinfulness of that original plan.”

I think of a very similar NT illustration, that of Philemon. Paul sends the slave, Onesimus, back to Philemon, to restore the system of authority which there also had been broken. The slave who escaped became a believer, and Paul seeks to restore the proper relationship of authority. He sends him back to his master. In tender love.

Phlm. 1 “To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker...8 Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, 9 yet I appeal to you on the basis of love. I then, as Paul —an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus — 10 I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains. 11 Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me. 12 I am sending him —who is my very heart —back to you. 13 I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel. 14 But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do will be spontaneous and not forced. 15 Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good — 16 no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord.”

Paul then makes an amazing statement,

Phlm. 17 “So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. 18 If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me.”

It is always true that God works to restore relationships broken by sin, and to restore the system of authority which he has established, a system of authority strained by sinful actions. He does so with Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar.

Even so, these actions suggested by Sarah bring about horrible consequences. Including innocent victims. In one sense you could charge Hagar with immorality just as much as Abraham, yet in a greater sense, I believe, she was an innocent victim. And as is often the case that,

C. Sinful actions will produce innocent victims.

Hagar didn’t ask for this. To a certain degree, she had no choice whatsoever. She was under authority. Now, she could have refused to obey this request, and she should have--if she wished to be without sin herself. But the greater sin is that committed by the one in authority. Those in authority have greater responsibility to those under their authority. They are responsible to protect and provide, to lead and to sustain.

Sarah did none of those things. She subjected Hagar to a horrible situation, and thus sinned against her. Hagar became a victim of sin herself. Let me read what happened again,
v.6-9

Again, my point is that sin has terrible consequences, inevitable consequences. A sinful plan such as this one would, of necessity, bring about horrible results, and we can plainly see what they are.

So again, the application. Often, we, too, may face a particular problem in life and devise a plan to resolve it. But if that plan involves anything that is contrary to God’s word, it will fail. And fail miserably. It will create more problems than it will solve.

You can be assured of that.

Any plan that involves immorality, untruthfulness, deception, stealing, sabbath breaking, or harm to other people, will have bad consequences. This is, of course, the same context as when Abraham and Sarah entered Egypt, and Abraham came up with that horrible plan to lie about Sarah's identity. You just can't sin and get away with it!

There are consequences, and sometimes those consequences go far beyond the actual sin. Those arrested and imprisoned for their crimes may well face consequences long after repentance and forgiveness. A man unfaithful to his wife may lose his whole family, and so face consequences long after genuine repentance and forgiveness.

The point is, sin is never alone. It is never solitary. Wherever sin finds a home to live, it invites all its friends to join the party. Such is the example that is before us this morning.

But notice something else here. Something quite amazing. Notice what the Lord actually says to Hagar.
v.10-14

What grace! Hagar is so often used in Scripture as a negative example, a symbol of slavery, as we'll see in just a few minutes. She is told to return to her mistress Sarah. But even in that, she is richly blessed! God's chosen line, his chosen people and their Messiah would not come through the line of Hagar, but, nonetheless, she would have rich blessing herself. God is so gracious, and his providence so good.

And so my last point is that,

III. GOD'S GRACE AND PROVIDENCE ARE EVIDENT IN THE MIDST OF OUR FOLLY.

Don't go home today focusing in your mind on the foolishness of men, and women. Instead, go home thinking about the amazing goodness of God's grace.

A. God's grace was shown abundantly to Hagar.

Look at the revelation of this grace in,
v.10

Actually, Hagar had been blessed just by the appearance of the angel of the Lord himself, appearing in verse 9, and who is identified clearly as the Lord himself in verse 13. Hagar, the maid servant of Sarah, received a visitation from God! A vision. An appearance. A direct revelation.

And what a glorious promise! Hagar would be greatly blessed with uncountable descendants herself. And it was a personal blessing, a personal prophecy,
v.11

"Ishmael" literally means, "God hears." Hagar's son will be a continual reminder that God heard her pleas. He has heard her in her distress. God heard and blessed Hagar, this, the woman who would symbolize the slavery of the Old Covenant! So great is his grace.

And the Lord reveals to Hagar the nature of her son, not in any attempt to bring humiliation upon Hagar, but perhaps to give her wisdom and diligence in raising him. He would be a wild son. A wild donkey.
v.12

There is in that verse, however, sadly, obvious reference to

the last point, that the consequences of sin will actually continue for generations. Ishmael would be a man given to conflict, given to violence, given to aggression and antagonism and hostility. History has certainly shown the truthfulness of that prophetic word.

Yet, Hagar understood the goodness of this prophecy, and the goodness of God's grace which was revealed to her. She was thankful, and greatly comforted. In that thankfulness, she ascribes to God a new name, a name accurately defining his glory.

v.13

"The God who sees" is literally, El Roi. It is a good name for God, an accurate and a comforting name. One we should remember every time we pray. God sees! Therefore, he hears and answers. Our lives are not hidden, nothing about us is unknown to God.

What great comfort Hagar had, in the midst of her difficulties, to know that God sees her! She even names the place accordingly,

v.14

Beer Lahai Roi means "the well of the living one who sees me." Though she is not the representative of the line of God's people, still Hagar is a woman who knew God well, and whose simple faith to receive God's grace should be an encouragement to us all. Indeed, many of us might well have far less of a sense of God's grace and presence than she did. Beer Lahai Roi. "The well of the living one who sees me." May we serve that same God faithfully--the God who sees.

One more point to finish this study of Hagar, and now I want to

explain just why God determined all of this would happen. It was, of course, an event governed by his providence. And the point of this, along with everything in the OT, is to point to Christ.

B. God's providence causes all circumstances to point to Christ.

v.15-16

Hagar and Ishmael. God had a purpose for this son, and this woman. Though the original plan was sinful, though everyone involved had to endure the consequences of their sin, still God's providence was governing all his creatures and all their actions.

Keep in mind everything good that I've said about Hagar, and then realize that God, in his goodness, uses Hagar and Ishmael to describe and define the ultimate goodness of his own purpose. Hagar and Ishmael come to represent the old covenant, the OT system. They come to represent the law of the OT, the law which if used to obtain salvation, became a curse. They come to represent the slavery of the law from which we are freed in Jesus Christ.

In other words, Hagar and Ishmael represent the law as a schoolmaster to lead us to Christ.

Gal. 4:21 "Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not hear the law? 22 For it is written that Abraham had two sons: the one by a bondwoman, the other by a freewoman. 23 But he who was of the bondwoman was born according to the flesh, and he of the freewoman through promise, 24 which things are symbolic. For these are the two covenants: the one from Mount Sinai which gives birth to bondage, which is Hagar— 25 for this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia, and corresponds to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children— 26 but the Jerusalem above is free, which is the mother of us all. 27 For it is

written: “Rejoice, O barren, You who do not bear! Break forth and shout, You who are not in labor! For the desolate has many more children Than she who has a husband.” 28 Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are children of promise. 29 But, as he who was born according to the flesh then persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, even so it is now. 30 Nevertheless what does the Scripture say? “Cast out the bondwoman and her son, for the son of the bondwoman shall not be heir with the son of the freewoman.” 31 So then, brethren, we are not children of the bondwoman but of the free.”

All of this was part of God’s eternal purpose. His predetermined plan, a plan which causes all circumstances to point to Jesus Christ. We’ll see more of Hagar and Ishmael in chapter 21, when they are contrasted with Sarah and Isaac, and there, too, we will see Christ.

God’s promise would be fulfilled, but not through human effort, as Sarah and Abraham attempted to do. Instead, God’s promise would be fulfilled by his supernatural power, revealed by his grace, receive by us through faith alone.

So don’t let this OT account of Hagar and Ishmael be just a good story with a good moral. It’s so much more, for here Jesus Christ is being preached, for salvation would not come through Hagar, the bond servant. Instead, salvation would come through the free woman, and the son of the free woman would represent the freedom from the curse of the law which we have in Christ.

And so, as a schoolmaster, let Hagar and Ishmael lead you to Christ. Let this negative example of human attempts to achieve God’s purpose make you realize that salvation is not a matter of your own effort or your own achievements. It is not something you do in your own strength. It is a gift of God’s grace received

by faith alone.

And for all you who have received this salvation by faith, learn to live by faith, trusting God to fulfill his promises in your life, for he is the “God who sees.” Indeed, this morning as we come to God, we come to the well to drink of the truth of the gospel, and the name of that well is very rightly to be called, “the well of the living one who sees us.”