



Part 37 – Faltering People and Their Faithful God

Genesis 16:1-16

The three previous chapters of Genesis have taken us to soaring heights of not only God's faithfulness but also of Abram's faith. In chapter 12 we read how Abram unwisely led his family out of the land of promise and of his fear which led to lying about his relationship to Sarai, his

wife. By God's grace, however, Abram's faith and courage returned. He journeyed back to Canaan and entrusted himself solely to the Lord (ch. 13). Next, Abram demonstrated courageous faith by leading his men against the four eastern kings and rescuing his nephew Lot (ch. 14).

Following Abram's remarkable military victory we encounter chapter 15 which stands as a mountain peak in redemptive history. Here we are introduced to the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone. It is also the chapter which describes the ratification ceremony of the everlasting Covenant of Grace; the covenant God made with Abraham, fulfilled by Jesus Christ.

1. Our disappointments and God's sovereignty

Vv. 1-2

- The chapter opens with a reminder of Sarai's barrenness. In Ancient Near Eastern culture, barrenness was considered a grievous tragedy rather than a difficult physical anomaly. Often it was viewed as a mark of displeasure from the gods. So the barren woman was consigned to walk among her people in shame. By this time Abram and Sarai had been in the Land of Promise for 10 years and yet the Lord had still not yet delivered on his promise to give them a son. By this time Abram was about 85 years old (ten years on since 12:4). We can hear the plaintive nature of her words to Abram: "Behold now, the LORD has prevented me from bearing children..." (vs. 2). The faith which had blossomed earlier after the Lord's assurance (ch. 15) has given way to disappointment and sad resignation.
- When our faith fails in the face of disappointment we are vulnerable to a host of errors and even foolish decisions. Think for instance of a woman who longs to be married and yet God has so far shut the doors to that opportunity. When the waiting becomes unbearable she may decide to lower her standards, tolerate the intolerable, and rush into a commitment all the while placing the blame on God for making her wait too long. Or what of the Christian parents whose grown child they've prayed for, for years, taught the gospel, and loved in the faith wanders far from Christ? How tempted they are to resent the child or even come to believe that God has cruelly failed them. Or what of the Christians who have suffered for years from chronic pain, cancer which refuses to leave their body, or emotional despair which repeatedly brings them to the edge of hopelessness? So far, for these struggling souls, nothing has changed. And in this lifetime their disappointing circumstances may not change.
- Though we know that Sarai's shame will be turned to joy, there are others in the Scriptures and throughout the history of God's people who, in this fallen world, were never entirely rid of their disappointment. The Book of Hebrews tells us that the Old Testament saints died having not seen the fulfillment of God's covenant of grace: "These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth" (11:13).
- How kind of God to use his holy Word to highlight with such sympathy Sarai's disappointment. Certainly, she will address her disappointment in ways that are sinful. But once again, how helpful it is that God shows us this not through villains but through giants of the faith like Abram and Sarai. Most supremely God himself in the Person of Jesus Christ entered into our disappointments and pain and sorrows. He knew what it was to suffer. He knew what it was to be let down by even his closest allies. He knew what it was to experience the excruciating silence of God. What mercy it is that God quite literally walked our path.

2. Our failures and God's grace

Vv. 1-6

- For Sarai, the time to act was now. It would not be long till Abram would be beyond his capability to father a child. So in her unwillingness to wait any longer on the Lord to act, Sarai devised a plan of her own. Sarai's plan was actually something not uncommon in her day. In ancient Assyrian law and custom there was a provision for a husband to take to himself a slave girl should his wife be unable to bear a child. If the slave girl bore a child the husband was free to sell her as he wished. And this is precisely what Sarai prescribes and Abram accepts (vv. 3-4). Here we see the age old conflict between what is acceptable in human culture and what is acceptable to God.
- Notice how the writer tells us twice (vv. 1, 3) that Sarai as "Abram's wife" (literally "the wife of Abram). Then there is mention of the 10 year wait (vs. 3b). Next we are told that when Sarai gave Hagar to Abram the writer calls him "her [Sarai's] husband" (vs. 3c). We already know that Sarai is Abram's wife and Abram is Sarai's husband. But here the inspired writer is underscoring those facts to draw out the sad debacle they are creating. The mention of the passage of time (10 years) once again reminds of us of the Bible's sympathy with our plight in a fallen world. But that sympathy never becomes a license for the couple's sinful response. This faith eschewing plan will have devastating consequences which are felt to this day over 4,000 years later.
- Sarai's plan – endorsed by Abram – was wrong on every conceivable level. It was a sin against God who gave his word that he would give them a son. God had proven himself faithful already. They had no justifiable reason to stop waiting on the Lord. It was a sin against Hagar, the Egyptian slave girl, who was treated as property to be used and cast aside. It was a sin against Sarai in that it diminished her character and subjected her to Hagar's mockery. It was a sin against Abram, leading him away from his patient faith in God.
- What a devastating failure for all the actors in this drama. Sarai failed by concocting such a faithless plan and then blame-shifting once it went awry. Hagar failed by mocking her mistress Sarai. And Abram failed by passively accepting an unacceptable plan rather than tenderly leading his wife to greater faith. He failed by treating Hagar as human property. He failed to trust the God who had only ever proven to be trustworthy.
- And yet through it all are the reverberations of God's grace. God will not allow the failure of his people to derail his covenant of grace. Remember that this covenant will not stand or fall on the obedience of God's people. By his grace, God has guaranteed the successful fulfillment of this covenant to save everyone who believes without exception. Not even this colossal failure will stop it. The promised seed will still be born to Abram and Sarai.

3. Our sorrows and God's care

Vv. 7-16

- The passage makes clear that Hagar was not merely an innocent observer to these events. We get the distinct impression that if the roles were reversed, she would have done the same as Sarai. Nevertheless, Hagar was treated cruelly. Her sorrow and need were great. The slave girl was now an outcast. And while God's decree to continue the righteous seed through Abram will not change, neither does his character change. He is still a God of compassion; a God who cares. Or, as Hagar refers to him, "a God of seeing" (vs. 13).
- God's care for Hagar is demonstrated in several remarkable ways. First, he appears to her in a theophany. A theophany is a physical appearing of God. Here we meet that mysterious figure known as "the angel of the Lord" (vs. 7). Most likely the angel of the Lord (who appears at several key moments in the Old Testament) is the eternal Son who was incarnate in the Person of Jesus. Not only that, he speaks to her and calls her by name (vs. 8). This is the only record in the Old Testament of God addressing a woman by name. What a rare and spectacular moment this must have been for the Lord to appear in this way to this castoff slave girl!
- God's care for Hagar is also shown in his calling her to return to Sarai. Considering how she'd been treated this may sound odd at first. But this is better by far than for her to return to her pagan past. By calling her to return, the Lord is calling her to believe the God of Abraham. He is calling her to salvation; to find her place in the tents of Shem (9:26-27).