

## Lessons from the life of Abraham (Genesis chapter 16)

(Based on the writings of C.H.M.)

### PATIENCE: THE KEY TO VICTORY

When we come to chapter 16 of Genesis, we find that Abraham's faith begins to waver - he begins to lose his simple, happy confidence in what God had promised him.

God had assured Abraham that he would have a son through whom would come a great nation. But after all, Abraham was now eighty-six years old, and Sarah was only ten years younger and still barren – 'sterile is the word we'd use today).

In her desperation to bring about something that God had promised to do, Sarah turned to natural means at her disposal:

*"Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. But she had an Egyptian maidservant named Hagar; so she said to Abram, "The Lord has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my maidservant; perhaps I can build a family through her." (Genesis 16: 1-2)*

Isn't this a familiar scenario? The impatience that unbelief produces?

God had promised Abraham and Sarah children and yet nothing was happening! As the years passed by, their confidence faded and the thing that God promised just didn't seem possible anymore.

Sarah now doesn't really believe that God is going to do what He promised – either she believes that He can't or she believes that He won't – it doesn't really matter which: it's still the sin of unbelief!

So, what does Sarah do?

She searches around for a way to *'help God out'*.

She looks for a natural, humanly reasonable way to bring about what God promised that *He* would do! And Abraham should have seen this for what it was. He should have sat Sarah down and had a long talk with her. He should have explained that both of them needed to wait patiently on the Lord to fulfil His promise.

People prefer anything to the attitude of waiting! It's one thing to believe a promise in God's word at first – maybe a promise that we believe with all our heart that God has given to us - but it's quite another thing to wait quietly for God to fulfil that promise - in *His* time and in *His* way.

When things don't seem to be working out – even when we're in God's will, we'll often try anything – any scheme – any program - to *make sure we bring about what God has promised*, whether in our personal lives or in our churches.

But God wants is *faith* because only faith can please God!

*"Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see." (Hebrews 11:1)*

God isn't interested in our schemes, our plans – even our efforts!

*"Without faith it is impossible to please God because they that come to God must believe that He is." (Hebrews 11:6a) (italics mine)*

Do we understand the significance of this? Much of the time we plan and strategize and worry *as if God doesn't really exist* – or at very least we fail to appreciate just what kind of God He is – faithful, caring and “...**able to do exceedingly abundantly above all we ask or think.**” (*Ephesians 3:20*)

We read of something He's promised to do and then we try to do it ourselves!

The verse goes on: “...**and that he rewards them that diligently seek him.**” (*Hebrews 11:6b*)

But it's so often, the case that spiritual immaturity results in Sarah's attitude – restlessness and impatience.

With God, we're often like children on a family outing – say a longish journey into the country. The family sets out, full of *Wheaties* and good cheer, but, because the children aren't old enough to understand the nature and the length of the journey, and how much time is required to finish it, they soon start to whinge and grumble.

“When are we there?” ..... “Are we there yet?”

The child doesn't doubt the parent! The child believes that the family *will* arrive at the destination. But what immaturity produces, is a child who is restless and impatient.

This is the problem in our spiritual lives. And so, the writer to the Hebrews he urges the believers:

“**We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised.**” (*Hebrews 6:12*) (*italics mine*)

*God* makes a promise, *faith* believes it, *hope* anticipates it, and *patience* waits quietly for it!

In *Genesis 15*, Sarah and Abraham showed faith in God but in *Chapter 16*, both of them failed in patience. What Sarah had effectively said was this: ‘*The Lord has failed me. Maybe Hagar can do the job for me!*’

If we lose the sense of God's nearness; if we lose sight of His faithfulness and if we lose confidence in His ability and sufficiency, then we tend to try *everything* and *anything* to reach the desired end. We, of course, call this an ‘intelligent and logical use of resources. The Bible calls it *unbelief!*

Often the hardest thing in life to do, is to: “**Stand still and see the salvation of the Lord.**” (*Exodus 14:13*)

If Sarah had said: ‘*Nature has failed me; but God can do the job for me,*’ how differently everything would have turned out. And this was the right attitude to take in any case. I mean, nature really *had* failed Sarah: her husband was in his late eighties, and she was sterile!

But instead of trusting *God* to fulfill His promise Sarah tried to use other means. And she did what seemed reasonable and logical: she chose to use their young, fertile Egyptian maidservant.

Sarah hadn't learnt to turn away from natural resources. She hadn't yet learnt that in spiritual things - in the accomplishment of what God has promised - natural capability and natural ability mean absolutely nothing in God's eyes!

Hagar could certainly get pregnant, but she was no more able to deliver the *promised* child than Sarah herself was! And Abraham should have realized this.

*Nature* - young or old, powerful, weak, attractive or plain – it's all the same to God and therefore all the same to faith!

Nothing human, no matter how capable, is able to bring about God has promised.

Have *you* tried to bring about what you believe are God's promises for your life? Are you relying on yourself - your gifts and abilities? Are you dependent on other people for your opportunities? Dependent on them to recognize you? Do you see the years slip by and despair of ever really making your life count for the Lord? Do opportunities seem to have always passed you by? Are you becoming impatient and disillusioned?

It's so important to stop depending on ourselves, on others, and on circumstances. And yet we'll only be able to do so when we're consciously leaning on the only true, wise and living God.

Of course, God sometimes uses natural methods to accomplish His will. If we didn't believe that, none of us would ever go to the doctor for treatment. We'd never buy an alarm system for our home. In the words of one wonderful, old teacher, we'd look at the insurance company as a '*depot of unbelief*'.

And clearly, this would be irresponsible!

We don't despise natural instruments – human or otherwise: that would be recklessness - not faith!

But here's the difference!

Unbelief looks *only* at the *instrument*. And it judges the success of the instrument by the extent to which it seems to have worked.

Faith, on the other hand, values something only if its being *used by God* – and for that reason only!

Saul looked at David - then he looked at Goliath – and he said:

**“You are not able to go out against this Philistine and fight him; you are only a boy, and he has been a fighting man from his youth.” (1 Samuel 17:33)**

Yet the question in David's mind was not whether *he* was able to defeat Goliath but whether *Jehovah* was able to do so. David, and his slingshot were merely the instruments God had chosen to use. *And For that reason only* - they were successful! Because in our lives, the *means* is not important. The doctor's surgery or the naturopath's clinic; this job or that career. What is all-important is whether or not *God* is using the instrument.

It reminds me of the time Jonathan and his armor-bearer attacked the Philistines at Micmash. Alone, without the knowledge of the other Israelites, the pair of them put an army to flight. And, when speaking to his young armor-bearer, Jonathan gives us his reasoning:

**“Nothing can hinder the Lord from saving, whether by many or by few.” (1 Samuel 14:6)**

God had promised Abraham and Sarah a son. But Hagar *wasn't* God's instrument! And because they resorted to her, Abraham and Sarah brought trouble and sorrow on themselves!

“He (Abraham) slept with Hagar and she conceived. When she knew she was pregnant, she began to despise her mistress.” (*Genesis 16: 4*) (*brackets mine*)

Sarah’s dignity was trampled down by Egyptian bondservant and Sarah, instead of being empowered by her efforts to fulfil God’s will in her life, found herself in a place of weakness. She found herself an object of contempt. Hagar despised her and mocked her.

And ever since then, Ishmael’s descendants have despised the children of Israel and in the Middle East we’re now seeing the full flowering of that contempt.

What we learn from this, is that the only true place of dignity and power in the Christian life is when we feel ourselves to be weak, acknowledge our weakness and become completely dependent on God.

Paul said this in his letter to the Corinthians: “For when I am weak, then I am strong.” (*2 Corinthians 12:10*)

There is no-one so entirely independent of everyone around as a child of God who is really walking by faith and waiting only upon God. The moment you or I begin to rely upon natural abilities or upon the world - the moment we put ourselves in debt to anybody or anything but God Himself - we will lose our dignity and our testimony.

So, impatience and unbelief brought Sarah both disgrace and humiliation!

But what was her reaction? How did she deal with it?

“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.’” (*Genesis 16: 5*)

When we act wrongly, when the things we try to do don’t work out, when things go wrong in our lives, we’ve got a tendency to put the blame on someone else. If a movement falters, if our carefully thought-out plans don’t go well, if we don’t get used the way we feel we should, then we’re inclined to look at others for the reason. But what caused the problem in the first place?

Impatience and unbelief!

“Except the Lord build a house, they labour in vain that build it:” (*Psalms 127:1*)

The work is all of God! Paul, in his letter to the Philippian church, says this:

“Being confident that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.” (*Philippians 1:6*)

An absolute certainty in the Christian life is this: if we’re living close to the Lord with no known sin in our lives – and yet God’s will isn’t being perfectly worked out in our experience and our spiritual lives aren’t flourishing, it can only be for one of two reasons: either we’ve not trusted God to work out His will in our circumstances Or, having trusted Him, we’ve failed to wait patiently for Him to do His work. We’ve tried to live in our way, according to what we think *should* happen – with our *gifts*, with our *circumstances*, and with our *lives*.

And now Sarah tries to get rid of the problem that her own impatience had created:

“Your servant is in your hands,’ Abram said. ‘Do with her whatever you think best.’” Then Sarai mistreated Hagar; so she fled from her;” (*Genesis 16:6*)

But Sarah couldn’t get rid of the slave-woman by harsh treatment. And we can’t counter the results of our mistakes by acting high-handedly; by justifying ourselves; by criticizing other believers; by blaming circumstances.

If we do, we only make matters worse. The Bible tells us that when we mess up, we need to humble ourselves, confess our sin and wait on God for deliverance!

“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” (*1 John 1:9*)

But there was none of this with Sarah. She tried to get herself out of an awkward situation in her own way - but it didn’t work!

“Then the angel of the Lord told her (Hagar), ‘Go back to your mistress and submit to her.’” (*Genesis 16: 9*)

Hagar had to return and give birth to her son who proved to be great trial. Abraham and Sarah had to endure Ishmael’s presence for a number of years, then get rid of him in *God’s* way – as recounted in chapter twenty-one.

And the problems didn’t stop there! The descendants of Ishmael form some of the Arab nations who have been implacably opposed to Israel over the centuries.

What a price to pay for a moment of impatience and unbelief!

But what Abraham and Sarah’s experience teaches us, is that when we make mistakes because of our unbelief, things *must take their course*.

The Bible says that “A man reaps what he sows.” (*Galatians 6:7*)

Perhaps you find yourself in difficult circumstances. Things which might be the result of mistakes made and decisions you’ve come to regret. You’ve thrown yourself before the Lord and found that grace forgives the sin and restores the soul. But you’ve also learnt that what is sown, must be reaped. Sometimes we must put up with, and live through, the consequences of our actions.

But God is able to work out His will in every life – without exception! Human wisdom may say you’ve blown it, but God never does! He is able to “restore the years that the locusts have eaten.” (*Joel 2:25*)

God doesn’t reckon in years – or in numbers. He can take your life, right now, no matter what mistakes you’ve made, and He can make it a blessing for His glory.

But learn the lesson from Sarah and Abraham. Whatever you’ve done up to this point, realize that the *rest* of your life will be safer and more blessed if you determine to not only trust in the promises of God, but to also patiently wait for their fulfillment.

May God bless you as you seek His will in your life.  
Amen.