

IT ALL DEPENDS ON ME

by Ray C. Stedman

This record of the life of Abram was clearly not written merely to give us historical facts from the distant past. Much of Christian education is superficial in that it is concerned more with the mileage from Jericho to Jerusalem than with the distance between man in his lost estate and the heart of God. But though we find the physical details of Abram's life interesting, we are much more concerned with their spiritual significance to us. To read the Old Testament thus makes every page glow with color and light from God.

In Chapter 16 of Genesis, God begins to translate what he has shown Abram in visions into the practical experience of his life. He does this also with us. We catch sight of great truths out of the Word and grasp them intellectually, but then they must become a part of us through experience and get down into our hearts where they affect and change us. It is one thing to pass an examination on the process and methods of the spiritual life, but it is quite another thing to pass God's examination of the degree to which we have translated this knowledge into daily experience. We shall see here that although Abram had been adequately and accurately instructed through the visions he received, yet he needed sad experience to teach him the power of the self-life within and the need for the daily experience of the cross of Christ.

In Chapter 16, Verse 1, we read,

Now Sarai, Abram's wife, bore him no children. {Gen 16:1a RSV}

After all the lofty experiences of his visions, this was the heartbreaking fact to which Abram returned. For ten years he had been awaiting the fulfillment of God's promise. Sarai was by this time almost seventy-five years old. Still there was no son, and despite the renewed promises, Abram was puzzled and discouraged by the problem of barrenness.

This is also our problem in the life of faith. Like Abram, we too are justified by faith. We accepted this gift of God's righteousness by a simple act of our will. We know we possess it, not by our efforts but by our faith in Jesus Christ. Then we set about trying to please God because we are now his. We do it by the only means we know -- trying to do the best we can. But we discover quickly that somehow our Christian experience loses its glow and fire, and instead of the fruit of love, joy, and peace which we were led to expect, we find instead nothing but barrenness. We have the same problem Abram had. This life which is expected to produce immediate fruit results only in barrenness and it is difficult for us to understand. We find no effectiveness in our lives. We are not enjoying Christ as we once did. This is reflected in some of our hymns. We sing:

Where is the blessedness we had
When first we knew the Lord?

We look back to that first experience because our present experience has grown cold and is not producing the joy, the glory, the glow and vigor that we expected. We are trying our best, but something is wrong. Sarai is barren, and there is no fruit as God had promised.

When the problem of barrenness begins to haunt us, the next thing is inevitable: The proposal of the flesh to do something about it!

She had an Egyptian maid whose name was Hagar; and Sarai said to Abram, "Behold now, the Lord has prevented me from bearing children; go in to my maid; it may be that I shall obtain children by her." And Abram hearkened to the voice of Sarai. So, after Abram had dwelt ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her maid, and gave her to Abram her husband as a wife. (Gen 16:1b-3 {RSV})

There is much in this action of Sarai's which seems deserving of praise. It was, first of all, an act of genuine

and costly sacrifice. She evidently had said something like this to herself: "God has promised my husband a son, through whom he means to fulfill all his promises. Yet he has never said that the son must come through me, and perhaps he means to fulfill this promise another way." So she resolves, through what struggles we can only imagine, to give up her own rights in an act of courageous renunciation. She gives up what is a wife's most precious possession, the right to have her husband's sole affection, and she offers her maid to her husband that he might have a child by her and thus fulfill the will of God.

Abram was, as we know, a monogamist. That is not the same as monotonous! He had only one wife, and he was quite content with that arrangement. But to give him the son of his heart's desire, Sarai was willing to sacrifice that relationship. It was not only an act of real sacrifice, but also one of deep sincerity. She was not hoping that he would talk her out of this. She was quite prepared to go through with it, cost her what it may. She took the initiative in proposing it.

Furthermore, it was an acceptable act, strange as that may appear to us. There was nothing immoral about it in the eyes of the community. This was common in the life of these nomadic people. Many of the Canaanite leaders would have had more than one wife and neither Abram nor Sarai would be less highly regarded because of this act. No one would laugh at her, nor point the finger of scorn. It was a perfectly proper and seemly act in the eyes of the community.

Yet, as we see the end of this action, we are aware that it was an act of appalling folly and stupidity, resulting in endless sorrow and heartache to all concerned. The results are evident yet, 4,000 years later! The Arabian nations originated in this act, and the enmity which sprang up between Israel and the Arabs, descendants of Ishmael, troubles the world to this day. If ever we have a picture of the longevity of sin, it is here. Despite the seeming rightness of this to Sarai, it was the worst thing she could possibly have done.

But what was wrong with it? How could Sarai have known what the results would be? How can we blame her for her decision? Here we need to go very slowly and listen very carefully. We are so like Sarai ourselves that we feel resentment at the idea that she should be blamed for this. Yet if we do not learn the lesson here, we shall find our own Christian lives continually plagued with this problem of barrenness, and we shall miss the secret of victory and fruitfulness. Here is pictorially presented the great secret Paul labors to unfold in Galatians: How to walk in the Spirit and not fulfill the lusts of the flesh. He uses this very incident to illustrate it.

Sarai's difficulty was simply that all of her actions grew out of a basic philosophy which, put very simply, says: "God has told me what he wants, now the rest of it depends on me. God has shown me what the goal is, and it is up to me to figure out how to reach it. I know what he wants, and I can count on him for help, but the rest is up to me." This is the philosophy which led to all the folly and heartache and sorrow that Abram and Sarai experienced, as have many others through the running centuries since then.

You will recognize at once that this is a very common and widespread philosophy. We continually think and act this way in the church today. We say the reason God's work is not going forward as it should is that we are not trying hard enough. The barrenness in our experience is due to the fact we have not really put ourselves into this. Let us hold some more committee meetings and get going. It all depends on us.

We find in our Bibles what we call "the Great Commission," (Mark 16:15b {RSV}): "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation." This is the goal he wants us to fulfill, we say; now the rest is up to us. We must plan all the strategy, we must raise the money, and determine where it will be spent, we must convince candidates that they should go. It is all up to us to carry out God's will.

And we do get some fruit from this, we get results. We hold our meetings, and plan our programs, and put on our pressures, and we get results, but, oh, they are so unsatisfactory! Do you know why? We've gotten Ishmael instead of Isaac!

We hear our Lord say in the first chapter of Acts, "You shall be witnesses" {cf, Acts 1:8b}, and every truly Christian heart says, "All right, Lord, this is what you want me to do -- I will do it." We never bother to find out how he wants it done, or whether he has a program to carry it out. We start out in fleshly zeal and pass out

tracts to everyone we meet, or buttonhole people at meetings. When it all fails, we recognize that something is wrong, and we wring our hands, and quit. We say, "I've tried to obey the Lord, but it doesn't work, so I quit!"

We read in Scripture that we should have elders in every church, and God's plan is to direct his church through these men. So we hold an election and put up the wealthiest members or the most popular ones, and these men run the church as they would a business, stumbling on in total disregard of the Living Head who is completely capable of running his own church quite successfully. We never bother to find out how he makes known to us the men of his choice, and how he proposes to declare his will through them. So we have a church filled with divisions and strife, and realize we have Ishmael on our hands instead of Isaac.

Perhaps the worst thing of all, and certainly the matter before us in the story of Abram and Sarai, is that, in reading Scripture, we learn we are supposed to be conformed to the image of Christ -- so we set out to start trying to be like Jesus. We make up a list of rigid rules for acceptable behavior. We become frightfully busy doing things for God. We work our fingers to the bone, and spend hour after hour in the church, neglecting our family, our own life, and everything else in order to do things for the Lord. We sincerely try to meet his demands. We do our best. We note how the community around approves our strenuous efforts and pats us on the back for our faithful spirit. But despite all the effort and sincerity, deep in our hearts we know there is nothing but barrenness. Or, if there is fruit, it is not the kind we wanted. It is forced, unnatural, sustained only by continual effort. We are far short of the image of Christ.

This was what happened to Sarai. Note the sacrifice, the seemliness, the appearance of selflessness. The result is fruit all right, but it is Ishmael, not Isaac -- the fruit of the flesh rather than of the Spirit. In some moment of illumination we ask, "Why are we so barren? Why so unfruitful? Where is the impact, the power? What has become of the glow, that living vitality we see in the early Christians? What is wrong?" It is all a result of failing to learn God's way as well as his will.

In Verse 2, we read, "Abram hearkened to the voice of Sarai and went in to Hagar the Egyptian." Abram was more culpable than Sarai. She acted in relative ignorance, but he knew better. We are specifically told that he had dwelt ten years in the land of Canaan, learning every day that God is sufficient for every need. He should have learned that God knows what he is doing and is quite capable of administering and carrying out his plans. He had observed God's methods for ten years; he should have been a steadying influence upon Sarai here, but instead he hearkened to her and went in to Hagar. It is the story of Adam and Eve all over again.

There are three obvious mistakes that lay behind Abram's act:

1. First, he listened to the voice of one who was not as far along in the spiritual life as he was. This is a frequent source of failure today. What may seem right to young Christians may be terribly wrong for you, simply because you are at a different level or stage of spiritual growth. We must ever be careful of taking advice from someone who is younger in spiritual things than we. This is why the Spirit of God warns against placing men in leadership in the church who are novices. It is not enough to have the gifts of the Spirit, equipping one for leadership. There must also be the cumulative experience of time and spiritual growth, making possible wise direction.
2. Abram's second mistake was that he consented to something that especially harmonized with the desires of his self-life. Take care here! He longed for a son, and the longing, though proper, made him too ready to find a way to satisfy it. When some advice is particularly along the line of something you want very much to do, be careful. It may be nothing more than a pleasing of the self-life, as it was here.
3. The third mistake, the one he shared with Sarai, was his readiness to do the will of God without seeking to discover the way of God. Here is the heart of the problem. This is the most serious error of Christians today. Hudson Taylor said, "God's work, done in God's way, will never lack God's supply." And the entire record of the China Inland Mission is proof of its truth.

All through Scripture there is incident after incident to illustrate the folly of being committed to the will of God

without being committed to his way:

When young Moses graduated from the University of Egypt, he came out with his diploma in his hand, a doctor of philosophy in the humanities. There was burning in his heart a great crusade. He knew he was the chosen instrument by which God planned to deliver the people of Israel from the bondage and slavery in which they lived. The first thing he saw was an Egyptian beating an Israelite. He said to himself, "Ah, this is my opportunity. Here is a slave being mistreated. I have a commission and mandate from God to deliver these slaves, and this is my chance to start." So he looked about to see if any man was watching, though it never occurred to him that God was looking, and he slew the Egyptian and hid his body in the sand. The next day he arose early and said to himself, "I got a good start on the job God gave me yesterday, so I'll go out and see whom I can deliver today." He found two more Israelites arguing, and he stepped up and said, "God has appointed me your judge, so let me hear this case." They said to him, "Wait a minute. Who appointed you to judge us? Are you going to kill us like you did that Egyptian yesterday?" {Exod 2:14}. And a great fear came into Moses' heart and he turned and ran into the wilderness. He had to flee Egypt. Why? Because he was trying in the strength of the flesh to do the will of God. For forty years his life was a burned-out desert of barrenness, until he learned at last the secret of yielding himself to the control of God's Spirit that he might do God's work in God's way.

Now back to the record of Abram's folly. We have seen the nature of the proposal of the flesh, now we must see the petulance that follows:

And he went in to Hagar, and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress. And Sarai said to Abram, "May the wrong done to me be on you! I gave my maid to your embrace, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt. May the Lord judge between you and me!" But Abram said to Sarai, "Behold, your maid is in your power; do to her as you please." Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she fled from her. (Gen 16:4-6 {RSV})

The immediate results of acting in the flesh are always the same. We become petty and petulant, displaying enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, and other ugly emotions which lie ever near the surface of the fallen human heart. Wherever these are evident they are the thermometer which tells us we are being ruled by the self and not by the Spirit. Here they are in this account, as contemporary as today's newspaper.

1. The first one mentioned is contempt. When Abram placed Hagar into rivalry with his wife, Sarai, Hagar became insolent and impertinent and held her mistress in utter contempt, taunting her concerning her barrenness. She forced Sarai to drink the gall of bitterness.
2. The next thing mentioned is unreasonableness. Sarai said to Abram, "May the wrong done to me be on you." If you have had any doubts that Sarai was a true woman, this will convince you! She had initiated the proposal to Abram, and urged it upon him. But when he gave in, she turned around and threw it back in his face, crying, "It's all your fault. Why did you do this to me? May the Lord judge between you and me." This woman is mad clear through!

That is what Laban said to Jacob when they parted from each other in anger, (cf, Gen 31:51-54). What it means is, "The Lord keep you from sticking a dagger in my back, and keep me from sticking one in yours, while we are unable to keep our eyes on each other." And that is what this means here. "May the Lord keep his eye on you, you rascal! Look what you've done." How completely unreasonable -- but how completely characteristic of the flesh.

3. Then the next symptom is irresponsibility. Abram said to Sarai, "Behold, your maid is in your power, do to her as you please." If you have had any doubts that Abram is a true man, this should convince you! He is dodging his responsibility, passing the buck. "Don't bother me with this," he says, "it is your problem -- you settle it."
4. The result is harshness and rebellion. "Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she fled from her." Do you know this pattern? The whole household is in an uproar by now. Yet every one of them could have

piously said, "We were only trying to do the will of the Lord." Each one is sure the others are wholly to blame, and none is willing to face the evil of his own heart. There is a strong inference at the beginning of the next chapter that this unhappy state of affairs went on for thirteen long years. All this is a result of trying to help God when it seemed perhaps he had tackled a job too hard for him, or that time would run out for him before it could be accomplished. We know the will of God; let us also discover his way.

In the last section of the chapter, we see the provision of God's grace.

The angel of the Lord found her [Hagar] by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur. And he said, "Hagar, maid of Sarah, where have you come from and where are you going?" She said, "I am fleeing from my mistress Sarai." The angel of the Lord said to her, "Return to your mistress, and submit to her." The angel of the Lord also said to her, "I will so greatly multiply your descendants that they cannot be numbered for multitude." And the angel of the Lord said to her, "Behold, you are with child, and shall bear a son; you shall call his name Ishmael; because the Lord has given heed to your affliction. He shall be a wild ass of a man, his hand against every man and every man's hand against him; and he shall dwell over against all his kinsmen." So she called the name of the Lord who spoke to her, "Thou art a God of seeing"; for she said, "Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?" Therefore the well was called Beerlahairoi; it lies between Kadesh and Bered. And Hagar bore Abram a son; and Abram called the name of his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram. (Gen 16:7-16 {RSV})

It is the angel of the Lord who finds Hagar. This is the first appearance of this phrase in Scripture, and as we compare it with other uses, we find that this refers to none other than the preincarnate Christ. This is the Son of God himself, appearing to Hagar. He says four things to her.

First, "where do you come from and where are you going?" These are always arresting questions. Hagar answers the first, but she has nothing to say to the last. She does not know where she is going. Where can she go? The question draws her helplessness sharply to her attention.

Then the angel says, "Return and submit." This is the only way to experience the grace and blessing of God. Had she gone on wandering into the wilderness, it would have been disastrous. Both she and the child in her womb would have died. When God finds us wandering, this is always what he says, "Return and submit!" "Submit to the circumstances you dislike, and I will work it out. To do anything else is folly." So Hagar returns.

With the command to return comes the promise of blessing. Blessing always follows obedience. "I will multiply your descendants so that they cannot be numbered for multitude." And then follows the prophecy of Ishmael's nature. "He shall be a wild ass of a man, his hand against every man and every man's hand against him." He will be a non-conformist, a Missouri mule -- a man whom no one can get along with.

The spiritual significance of this is explained in Galatians 4. There Paul says that Hagar is a picture of the Law and Ishmael, her son, is a picture of those who try to establish favor in God's sight through religious activity. These are the Ishmaelites, and God says there shall be a great multitude, more than any man can number. Spiritually it is written of them, "Those who are in the flesh cannot please God," {Rom 8:8 RSV}.

Hagar, glimpsing here something of God's omniscience and power, names him, "The God Who Sees" for she says, "Have I even here seen him who sees me?" This is the circumstance which gripped her. "Here is a God who sees me and knows me just as I am, and all that concerns me." So she named the well, "The well of One who lives and sees." (It is named after God, not after her, as the RSV suggests.)

Have you found God to be the One who lives and sees, the One who knows all about your life, and your circumstances? The One who knows the past and the future, and says to you as he said to Hagar, "Return and submit?"

That is the place of promised blessing.

We are also told that this well is located between Kadesh and Bered. *Kadesh* means "holiness" and *Bered* means "hail" or "judgment." Here is the well of grace, lying between holiness and judgment. When we begin to stray from the place of God's blessing toward the certainty of judgment, God meets us on the way, at the well of grace, saying, "Now wait a minute. I don't want to have to make this known to others. I don't want to judge you openly. I don't want to bring trial or affliction or heartache into your life to make you listen. Listen now. Return and submit so I won't have to do this." That is the well of grace.

So Hagar returns and Ishmael is born.

We read nothing about Abram for thirteen years. The next chapter opens when he is ninety-nine years old. This means that for thirteen years, strife, disagreement, bitterness, jealousy, and heartache characterized that tent in the land of Canaan. It is God's way of teaching Abram: "... for apart from me you can do nothing," (John 15:5b {RSV}). It does not depend on us, it all depends on him. We need constantly to reassert our utter dependence upon the God who knows us, knows our circumstances, knows our problems, and who is completely able to work through us to accomplish all that he desires.

Prayer

Our heavenly Father, how many mistakes we have made by doing this very thing that we have seen Abram do. Forgive us for our consummate folly and teach us, as you taught Abram, to walk in the Spirit in dependence only upon You. Lead us to the place where we recognize the folly of our flesh, and the impossibility of pleasing you in its strength. Teach us that all must be done by a constant and unrelenting reliance upon you to work through us. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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