

GENESIS

Why The Beginning Matters

Study 13

Abraham and The Folly of Homemade solutions

Genesis 16

Part 1 of 4: Faith is tested by Delay

Genesis 16:1-4a

Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. But she had an Egyptian slave named Hagar; so she said to Abram, "The Lord has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my slave; perhaps I can build a family through her."

Abram agreed to what Sarai said. So after Abram had been living in Canaan ten years, Sarai his wife took her Egyptian slave Hagar and gave her to her husband to be his wife. He slept with Hagar, and she conceived.

1) a) Objective question. Select all that apply. What are the potential reasons for a delayed promise according to the video lecture?

- A. To make us holy
- B. To prepare us
- C. To strengthen our faith
- D. To make us earn for it
- E. To reveal a weakness
- F. To benefit those who are watching us
- G. To purge us of pride
- H. To test our patience
- I. To provide what is best, not what is immediate
- J. To reveal our priorities
- K. To demonstrate His love

The Human Response to a Delay of fulfilling a promise

- Delay stimulates our natural impatience
- Delay leads to disappointment
- Delay threatens our faith in God's promises
- Delay causes an underestimation of God

- Delay tempts us to doubt God
- Delay tempts us to act unilaterally

b) Reflection question. We saw that Sarai behaved in the ways listed above when the promise of having a child was delayed. There were other factors that affected her behavior such as culture, emotions, public perception, legal acceptance of certain practices, and the perception that God is mean. How are we as Christians supposed to treat these factors in light of God's promises to us?

Pressure from	Modern examples	How we should respond
Culture		
Emotions		
Public perception		
Legal acceptance of certain (sinful)practices		
The perception that God is mean (from self and others)		

Relevant Verses

Isaiah 30:1

“Woe to the obstinate children,” declares the Lord,
 “to those who carry out plans that are not mine,
 forming an alliance, but not by my Spirit,
 heaping sin upon sin;

Psalm 27:14

Wait for the Lord;
 be strong and take heart
 and wait for the Lord.

Psalm 38:15

Lord, I wait for you;
 you will answer, Lord my God.

Part 2 of 4: Delay tempts us to act unilaterally

Gen 16:4b-5

When she knew she was pregnant, she began to despise her mistress. Then Sarai said to Abram, "You are responsible for the wrong I am suffering. I put my slave in your arms, and now that she knows she is pregnant, she despises me. May the Lord judge between you and me."

2) Discussion question. If having a slave bear a child for you (slave surrogate) is a legal and culturally acceptable practice back then, why was it wrong? (answers in lecture slides as well)

- Hagar was used like a tool
- not born of faith but of 10 years of desperation
- against God's intended purpose for men Gen 2
- Sarai's mistaken notion was that she could live her life through Hagar
- Culturally acceptable and legal acceptability does not equate with moral correctness
- Abraham didn't rebuke Sarah's criticism of God
- God has spoken to Abraham directly, not Sarah, so Abraham has greater responsibility

Relevant Verses

Proverbs 30:21-23

"Under three things the earth trembles,
under four it cannot bear up:
a servant who becomes king,
a godless fool who gets plenty to eat,
a contemptible woman who gets married,
and a servant who displaces her mistress.

James 3:1

Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.

Part 3 of 4: God is the God who hears and sees the Oppressed

Genesis 16:6-16

"Your slave is in your hands," Abram said. "Do with her whatever you think best." Then Sarai mistreated Hagar; so she fled from her.

The angel of the Lord found Hagar near a spring in the desert; it was the spring that is beside the road to Shur. And he said, "Hagar, slave of Sarai, where have you come from, and where

are you going?"

"I'm running away from my mistress Sarai," she answered.

Then the angel of the Lord told her, "Go back to your mistress and submit to her." The angel added, "I will increase your descendants so much that they will be too numerous to count."

The angel of the Lord also said to her:

"You are now pregnant
and you will give birth to a son.
You shall name him Ishmael,
for the Lord has heard of your misery.
He will be a wild donkey of a man;
his hand will be against everyone
and everyone's hand against him,
and he will live in hostility
toward all his brothers."

She gave this name to the Lord who spoke to her: "You are the God who sees me," for she said, "I have now seen the One who sees me." That is why the well was called Beer Lahai Roi; it is still there, between Kadesh and Bered.

So Hagar bore Abram a son, and Abram gave the name Ishmael to the son she had borne. Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore him Ishmael

3) Discussion question. Hagar was a foreigner, a woman, a slave, vulnerable, in trouble, and a victim, yet our God is a God that sees and hears the oppressed. What are the ways we can do to see people the way God sees them?

Part 4 of 4: Though we are unfaithful, God is always faithful

Galatians 4:21-26, 28-29, 5:1,13-14

Tell me, you who want to be under the law, are you not aware of what the law says? For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and the other by the free woman. His son by the slave woman was born according to the flesh, but his son by the free woman was born as the result of a divine promise.

These things are being taken figuratively: The women represent two covenants. One covenant is from Mount Sinai and bears children who are to be slaves: This is Hagar. Now

Hagar stands for Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present city of Jerusalem, because she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother.

...Now you, brothers and sisters, like Isaac, are children of promise. At that time the son born according to the flesh persecuted the son born by the power of the Spirit. It is the same now....

...It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery...

... You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself."

4) Reflection question. Hagar's son represents human effort and slavery whereas Sarah's son represented freedom and God's divine promise. God will be faithful in keeping us free from the yoke of slavery, however on a scale of 0-100%, how would you rate yourself in terms of using your freedom to love others in an average week? Has it improved from the previous few years or months?

Background Information

"Never confuse a single mistake with a final mistake." Scott Fitzgerald.

Take Away

Part 1 of 4: Faith is tested by Delay

Part 2 of 4: Delay tempts us to act unilaterally

Part 3 of 4: God is the God who hears and sees the Oppressed

Part 4 of 4: Though we are unfaithful, God is always faithful

Case Study

Case 1 – In-vitro Fertilization

Ken and Florence are a couple in their mid-30s who regularly attend the Second Baptist Church. They have been married for 12 years since they were 25. Ever since then, they have been trying to conceive a child.

Florence was particularly downcast after attempting for so long and they were not successful in having children. Ken suggested that they tried in-vitro fertilization (a.k.a. test tube babies). [In vitro fertilization (IVF) is a complex series of procedures used to help with fertility or prevent genetic problems and assist with the conception of a child.]

However, Florence has been to Delta class at the Second Baptist Church and remembers that in Genesis 16, Abraham and Sarah were faced with barrenness too and that they made a mistake by resorting to their own methods to have a son.

She is unsure if resorting to IVF is doing things her own way instead of God's way and is hesitant to commit to it. Nevertheless, she accepted that it may be a possibility for her to never have any children.

1) a) Discussion question. How was Florence's situation similar to Abram and Sarai's in Genesis 16?

Model Answer

Abram and Sarai were barren – they could not have children. Likewise, Florence and Ken were facing infertility.

b) Discussion question. How was Florence's situation different from Abram and Sarai's in Genesis 16?

Model Answer

Abram was promised by God that he would have a son "from your own body" (Gen 15:4). Effectively, when Sarai suggested that Hagar (her maid) be used as a surrogate, she was taking matters into her own hands. Ken and Florence did not receive any similar promises from God.

c) Objective question. Which of the following was Abram's mistake?

- A. Abram's mistake was to have a child through his wife's handmaid, Hagar (as a surrogate mother)
- B. Abram's mistake was to try to bring God's promise into effect through his own means

d) Discussion question. Why was it a mistake?

Model Answer

A slave wife and surrogate maternity was an accepted part of the culture. God had not yet revealed to his people that the cultural practice of polygamy and slavery was contrary to his will. Technically he was not breaking any 'rules' as he knew them.

While Abram did not 'break any rule', he sinned at the most fundamental level when he listened to Sarai's plan. As John Stott has put it, the essence of sin is human beings substituting themselves for God; the essence of salvation is God substituting himself for us. (See *The Cross of Christ*, p. 160.) The core of sin is self-salvation, self-justification, seeking to do for ourselves what only God can do, seeking to be our own Savior and Lord. That is a deeper definition of sin than 'breaking the rules.' Every act that breaks God's law is a sin, but sin is not always law-breaking. You can try to be your own Savior through law-keeping, as the Pharisees did by their efforts to be saved through their morality. Abram here shows how you can technically do nothing wrong but be moving far from God.

Because Abram's basic response was one of self-justification, it is not surprising to see how all the parties act and react in ways that lead to a complete breakdown. When Sarai says getting a child above waiting for God, she makes an idol out of being a mother and child-bearer. It is no surprise then that she finds her heart intolerably humiliated and bitter by seeing her slave happily pregnant. Pregnancy and child-bearing is now Sarai's main meaning in life and identity, and thus she feels attacked by the smugness of her servant. When Sarai comes to Abram and blames both him and Hagar for her misery, she continues with her self-justifying behavior. She needs to see herself as a victim. Her idolatry creates a delusional view of the situation. She can't admit her own sin and need for forgiveness.

Lastly, Abram's callous response is also self-justifying. He probably is stung by the complete unfairness of Sarai's claim that 'it's all your fault', but he doesn't want to look honestly at the situation and admit what part he has played. (When your accuser wrongfully exaggerates your wrong, the natural tendency of the self-justifying human heart is to refuse to admit any blame at all.)

From the fundamental root of self-salvation flows bitterness, blame-shifting, major denial,

jealousy, exploitation, injustice, classism, paranoia, family breakdown, and despair.

e) Discussion question. In Florence's situation, was she finding her identity in having children?

Model Answer

No. If her identity was founded upon being a mother, she would not be able to accept if she never had any children.

f) Discussion question. In view of the above, is in-vitro fertilization an acceptable for Ken and Florence?

Model Answer

Open for discussion.

Case 2 – The Bible is “Morally Incorrect”

Zack is an atheist who attended Alpha but has not been receptive to the Gospel of Christ. When asked why, he objects to the authority of the Bible. After reading Genesis and the story of Abram, Sarai, and Hagar, he claims that the Bible is teaching morally incorrect evil themes. “This story demeans women, condones slavery, and holds up people who act despicably as spiritual heroes!” – Zack, 2022

2) a) Discussion question. Is Zack's observation correct?

Model Answer

No, Zack's observation is incorrect. The Bible does not demean women, condone slavery, or hold up people who act despicably as spiritual heroes.

b) Discussion question. Does the Bible highlight the goodness of demeaning women and slavery? Or does the Bible highlight the destruction it brings?

Model Answer

We should point out that the writer of Genesis is in no way condoning polygamy, slavery, etc simply by reporting what happened. In fact, the thoughtful reader will see that all of these institutions, culturally accepted at the time, are being undermined by the narrator, who

highlights the destructiveness of all of these practices.

For example, in that hierarchical and patriarchal time, the 'iron law of primogeniture' dictated that the oldest son inherited the great lion's share of the whole estate. But at almost every place in the book of Genesis, we see God working to subvert traditional cultural practices. God chooses Abel over Cain, Isaac over Ishmael, Jacob over Esau, Judah and Joseph over older children. Likewise, polygamy and slavery do not come out looking like anything but disasters in every story and event.

c) Discussion question. Does the Bible condone slavery? Why or why not?

Model Answer

The Bible condemns race-based slavery in that it teaches that all men are created by God and made in His image (Genesis 1:27).

In Hagar's case, we should not assume that God is here supporting the whole institution of slavery. We must be very careful when trying to infer universal principles from historical narratives. We can't reason "God told her to go back, therefore God wants all slaves to submit to their masters." It just doesn't follow, because there might be other reasons that he told her to return. God does not say, "Go back, because you are a slave", but rather, "Go back, because I want to make you a great nation." From our perspective, we can see why the Lord sent Hagar back for her own good.

We know:

- a) as a runaway slave she was not safe, but might have been killed if caught,
- and
- b) that if she goes back, Sarai's continued idolatry-rooted jealousy would lead her to press Abram to divorce Hagar and send her away legally.

d) Discussion question. Is the Bible a series of moral stories? Or is it a record of how God redeems a lost mankind?

Model Answer

The Bible is not primarily a series of stories with a moral (though there are plenty of good and bad examples!) Rather, it is a record of God's intervening grace in the lives of people who

don't seek it, don't deserve it, who continually resist it, and who don't appreciate it after they have been saved by it. This means that those who are shocked and offended by this story may find that the story is well-designed to reveal the foundations of their own hearts.

Do you say, "I'm shocked and confused! These are the spiritual heroes I'm supposed to emulate, but they are really moral failures." Your shock may be because you have bought into a completely mistaken idea, namely that Christianity is about how those who live moral and good lives (like Abram, Moses, and David) are taken to heaven.

If yes, you are missing the whole point of stories like these — that even the ablest human beings who have ever lived could not rise above the brutality of their own cultures nor the self-centeredness of their own hearts. But by God's grace, and by their ultimate clinging to the promise of God's grace to moral failures, they triumphed.

Case 3 – Mormons and Polygamy

"Beginning of polygamy

Founded by Joseph Smith in 1830, the Mormon movement from its beginnings offered a unique perspective on the religious role of men.

One of the most influential events in the life of Joseph Smith was the death of his 25-year-old brother Alvin in 1823. In 1836, Joseph Smith had a vision of Alvin Smith in heaven. Based on this vision, he developed the Mormon teaching that families could be together in heaven if they underwent religious rites – called "sealings" – in Mormon temples. Any faithful Mormon approved by church leaders could perform these sealings.

Due in part to this powerful role it gave to men in helping to save the people they loved and brought to heaven, Mormonism attracted proportionally more male converts than any other American religious movement of the time.

In the early 1830s, Smith extended this view of the role of men to include polygamy as it was practiced by Old Testament prophets like Abraham. Smith taught that a righteous man could help numerous women and children go to heaven by being "sealed" in plural marriage. Large families multiplied a man's glory in the afterlife. This teaching was established as doctrine in 1843."

Article Source: <https://theconversation.com/explaining-polygamy-and-its-history-in-the-mormon-church-81384>

3) Discussion question. Does the Bible condone polygamy in the Old Testament? Why or why not?

Model Answer

It is clear from Genesis 2:24 and Jesus' use of it that monogamy was God's will from the beginning. Why, then, did God not tell Abraham, Jacob, and David about the evils of polygamy? But why not ask: why did God not tell them all about Jesus, the cross, the resurrection? The two are linked, because "To whom much is given, much will be required." (Luke 12:48) The more God revealed of his salvation, the greater the responsibility of the people who received it. God unfolded his revelation about redemption, his power of the Spirit, and his specific ethical prescriptions in stages, progressively increasing in detail and clarity.

This does not mean that polygamy 'was not wrong' in the Old Testament. We see monogamy as God's will from Genesis 2:24 (interpreted by Jesus) and the obvious point that in the Garden God put one man and one woman. The fact that polygamy was not penalized or spoken to directly by God does not mean it was legitimate. As a violation of the created order, it still brought devastation and breakdown.