

October 2, 2011

Sermon Overview:

“Do what comes naturally.” This familiar advice might be good wisdom when it comes to choosing a major; but when comes to finding salvation, doing what comes naturally is simply disastrous. Genesis 16 presents a story that shows how God’s promised salvation will not be fulfilled through natural means, but by a supernatural intervention. Our sermon looked at four aspects of this story: the pain, the plan, the plight, and the provision.

The Pain: At 75 years old Sarah had yet to bear a son for Abraham (v1). In a day when a woman’s identity, value, and fulfillment was wrapped up in her ability to have children, Sarah was a nobody. Since it was her duty to provide her husband with children, she would also have been considered a failure. Her lingering predicament was both difficult and devastating.

The Plan: Tired of waiting on God to fulfill his promise, Sarah decides to take matters into her own hands and devises a plan to remedy her pain. Sarah’s plan centered on an Egyptian servant named Hagar. Following a popular and accepted ancient custom, she tells Abraham to use Hagar as a surrogate mother. This looked like the only practical way to have a child. And it seemed to work. Hagar conceived. But it wasn’t God’s plan.

The Plight: Through an allusion to the fall narrative, the narrator indicates how Abraham and Sarah simply replay the actions of Adam and Eve (cf. Gen 3:6, 17). The fall out is as predictable as reality TV. Hagar, pregnant and elevated to the status of a wife (v3), shows pride and disdain toward Sarah. Sarah, disgusted and jealous, falsely blames Abraham. Abraham abdicates responsibility, allowing Sarah to abuse Hagar. Hagar flees, jeopardizing her life and the life of her unborn child. In the end, no one comes away looking very good.

The Provision: While on route to her native land, Hagar is suddenly addressed by God’s angelic representative, who assures Sarah that God has heard her cry and seen her plight. God promises that she will be blessed by her child, though her child will in no way be the promised son. The angel also sends Hagar back to Abraham and Sarah. His request is strange if not shocking when one considers how Hagar had been treated. Nevertheless, God has chosen Abraham and his promised offspring as his means of saving the world. By sending Hagar back, God places Hagar and Ishmael in the channel of blessing. The command thus represents a severe mercy. Once again God shows grace and provision in the face of human sin—this time to an “Egyptian” outside the elect line. The Israelites who first received this story would have taken great encouragement: If God graciously provides for wandering Egyptians, how much more for his children.

Passage for Discussion: Galatians 4:21–31

Genesis 16 illustrates how God’s people are wholly dependent on his sovereign will and supernatural power. To attempt independently to help God accomplish his saving purpose is what theologians call synergism. Ishmael would always be a stark reminder of the disaster that results from trying to fulfill God’s promise through human initiative and strength; i.e., through synergism. In Galatians 4, Paul likens Hagar’s son to a group of people who are slavishly dependent on their own strength and initiative. In contrast, he claims that God’s people are always dependent on the supernatural work of God’s Spirit. Those who began by God’s supernatural power must continue the same way (cf. Gal 3:2–3).

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Questions for Preparation and Discussion *Note that some questions are designated for preparation (P) and some for group discussion (D.) Study based on the English Standard Version*

Getting to Know Each Other:

1. What is the longest you have had to wait for a promise? What did you do when the person delayed in fulfilling his promise? [D]

Looking at the Bible:

2. In verse two Sarah says: “the LORD has prevented me from bearing children.” What do you think about Sarah’s perspective? What is her view of God? Was she right or wrong? [D]
3. Sarah’s words “it may be that I shall obtain children by her (v2)” could literally be translated “it may be that I will be built up by her.” What might this insinuate about the value Sarah placed on having a child? [D]
4. Read Gal 4:21–31. In v28, Paul says: “But you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise.”
 - a. To whom is he speaking? Who are the children of Promise? [P]
 - b. “But” implies a contrast. What is the contrast between? [P]
 - c. What do you think he means when he says that they are “*like Isaac*, children of promise”. What makes them different from children of flesh? [D]

Looking at Our Hearts

5. To most of our modern ears, it sounds patriarchal and deplorable to make a woman’s value dependent on her ability to have children.
 - a. What are some of the things that our culture ties a woman’s value to? [D]
 - b. What consequences of this do we see in our society? What effect have these had on your heart as a woman or man? [D]
6. Verse 2 suggests that Abraham found it easier to exercise faith outside his home than inside his home (cf. chap 13–15). Is that true for you? If so, why do you think that is?
7. In the sermon Kyle noted how every culture has its own form of “barrenness”. In other words, every culture has something or things that unless you have them, you are nothing.
 - c. What are some of our modern day forms of “barrenness”? What are some culturally acceptable ways for dealing with these modern day forms of “barrenness”? [P]
 - d. In what ways are you trying to remedy your “barrenness” through your own wisdom, initiative, and strength?
 - e. In what ways does the Gospel provide an answer to these forms of “barrenness”? [P]

Praying for Each Other

(Use these suggestions alone or with other prayer requests to help focus your time in prayer together).

- Pray for those who are in difficult situations and tempted to trust in themselves rather than to wait on the Lord.
- Pray for our church, that we would trust in God’s supernatural power, rather than in our own wisdom, strength, and resources.