

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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The Life of Abraham

The Dependence of Faith, Learning to Trust – Genesis:16 and 17

I am no better at playing the piano than I was 30 years ago. If anything, I am rather worse. There could be many reasons for that. I might have suffered a radical injury and been left with restricted movements in my arms. Less dramatically, I could, have moved to a smaller house with no room for a piano. The truth is rather more mundane: I simply haven't practised! I never got past the *beginner* stage anyway, and any slight skill I ever had at the piano is long gone. I am a better sailor, a slightly stronger cyclist and more skilled at my job: although others might smile sympathetically at my ability in all these areas. The bigger question is; have I made any progress in my faith? In almost every aspect of life, we learn best by doing; that is, by practise. If Abram and Sarai were going to make progress in the dependence of faith, they would need to learn to trust God more, and that would need practise. In my experience, there are two major difficulties with practise: it takes time and it is hard work - which is why I am unlikely to ever make progress at the piano! That's fine. I am quite happy with my other pastimes, and the world has hardly lost a great musical talent! But learning to trust God is a different matter altogether. It isn't an *optional extra* in the Christian life, and it wasn't something Abram could afford to neglect.

Perhaps I might still improve if I find somebody to supervise my learning and encourage me when I show signs of giving up. A mentor or a tiger mother, perhaps. On second thoughts, perhaps, at 55, I shouldn't still be relying on my mum!

What Abram had, and what we all have, is a God who never gives up on us. A God who is always ready to encourage us and provide opportunities for our learning. God certainly provides ample opportunity for Abram and Sarai to learn in the events related in today's passage!

Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. And she had an Egyptian maidservant whose name was Hagar. So Sarai said to Abram, See now, the LORD has restrained me from bearing children. Please, go in to my maid; perhaps I shall obtain children by her. And Abram heeded the voice of Sarai. Then Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar her maid, the Egyptian, and gave her to her husband Abram to be his wife, after Abram had dwelt ten years in the land of Canaan. So he went in to Hagar, and she conceived. And when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress became despised in her eyes. Then Sarai said to Abram, My wrong be upon you! I gave my maid into your embrace; and when she saw that she had conceived, I became despised in her eyes. The LORD judge between you and me. So Abram said to Sarai, Indeed your maid is in your hand; do to her as you please. And when Sarai dealt harshly with her, she fled from her presence. Genesis 16:1-6.

The very first sentence of our passage gives us the problem in a nutshell, *Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children*. The promise of a son was first made to Abram in Ur of the Chaldees.

The promise had been reiterated in chapter 15, that is, not long before the time of today's chapters. Abram had clearly believed God to begin with. He had left Ur on the basis of God's promise. But his faith seems to have dwindled by the time we reach chapter 16. God's promises seemed entirely empty since he had no children. The son and heir that God had promised had never arrived and the prospect of it ever happening was fast disappearing.

In the previous two talks, we have considered learning to follow and learning to be victorious. Practise was hard work in those areas as well, but they involved learning to do something active. Learning to trust sometimes means learning to do nothing but wait. How long should Abram and Sarai have been prepared to wait? How long are you prepared to wait for God? We may start out on some course of action, convinced that this is God's will for us and confident that God has promised to bless us in it. But, as time passes, we start to question whether we have made a mistake. It is a very reasonable question for us because it is quite possible we have confused our own enthusiasm with God's purpose. How long we should wait depends on how sure we are that something really is a promise of God. Such times of waiting bring a very strong temptation to take matters into our own hands and help God along a bit. That was the route that Sarai followed. If she couldn't have a child herself, perhaps there was another way to accomplish the same ends. After ten years in Canaan, the morals of that land seem to have rubbed off onto Sarai. Abram as well; since he seems to fall in with Sarai's plan with little persuasion.

Quite understandably, their attention was on the practical difficulties. We can easily follow their reasoning. Both Sarai and Abram were growing old and pregnancy just wasn't happening. Soon a child would be physically impossible, and then all God's promises would fall to pieces. There just had to be a child, so how could this be achieved? The compromise of another woman to bear the child suggested itself, and both Abram and Sarai seemed to jump at the idea. Waiting gave way to activism, and faith was replaced with practical expediency. After all, God didn't seem to be delivering on His word, so what other choice did they have? We might look down disapprovingly on their failure, but we have done the same thing repeatedly in our own lives; often with far less excuse than Abram and Sarai.

Abram does seem incredibly ready to agree with Sarai's plan. The name Sarai can be translated as *bossy*, and this chapter certainly shows a forceful side to her character! This incident raises the question of how we can distinguish between wise counsel and temptation to unbelief. Suppose somebody we know and trust (and surely Abram knew and trusted his wife) suggests a course of action to us that might help us out of a difficult situation. How can we know if it is godly counsel or the opposite? If we just think, *I know this person has my best interests at heart and they have shown good judgement in the past – they must be right!*, we will make the same mistake as Abram. We need to test the advice we are given against all the instructions and examples of the Bible. Not just to see if we can make it fit, but to see whether it sits comfortably with the character of the God that the Bible reveals. Of course, that isn't as straightforward as it sounds when we are in the middle of some crisis in our life.

Remember that Sarai and Abram had been trying for a child for years. Anybody who has struggled to start a family themselves, knows the cycle of raised expectation followed by crushing disappointment repeated every month. In ten years, that is 120 crushings of the dream!

We might be able to understand the urgent desire for a shortcut, but, as with all our attempts to show we know better than God, it soon ended in heartbreak. In an age before modern medicine,

there was no way of knowing whether it was Abram, Sarai, or both that was infertile. Hagar's pregnancy immediately answered that question, and in a way that must have been devastating for Sarai. Then Hagar proceeded to rub her mistress's nose in her pain, by adding the contempt of her servant to her other agonies.

In verse two, Sarai blames God for the problem saying, *The LORD has restrained me from bearing children*. In verse five Sarai blames Abram saying, *My wrong be upon you!* In the same verse she blames Hagar stating, *I became despised in her eyes*. We might begin to wonder if anything was ever her fault! But we have all got ourselves into a bit of a mess and then looked around for somebody else to blame. At one level, Sarai's first complaint was right. If God is sovereign over everything, then He had prevented Sarai from having children. But if God did so, it was with the intention of teaching her and Abram to trust, and develop a real dependence on Him, not with a wish to hurt her. Abram did deserve some reproach for not having refused to go along with the scheme in the first place, and Hagar should not have despised Sarai in the way that she did. The problem, though, with looking around for other people to blame, even when they are partly at fault, is that it becomes a way to avoid facing up to our own failings, confessing them and moving on with the LORD.

We don't have time to read through the next section, but it doesn't reflect very well on Abram or Sarai. Abram tells Sarai she can treat Hagar how she wishes, and Sarai treats her harshly. There is no indication that Abram intervenes, so the pregnant Hagar runs away. She meets the Angel of the LORD (a preincarnate appearance of God) by a well, and explains why she has fled. The Angel instructs her to go back to Sarai and submit to her, promising that the child, who is to be called Ishmael, will give her many descendants, but will be a wild man, at odds with everybody. We pick up the story again at chapter 16:15,16 – the last two verses of the chapter.

So Hagar bore Abram a son; and Abram named his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram.

It is not difficult to see how these verses emphasise that while Ishmael was the son of Abram, he was the son of Hagar – not Sarai. In short, the whole scheme has failed. This is not, and cannot be, the son that God had promised. They are back at *square one*: except that now Hagar has been treated badly, Sarai has been hurt and the relationship between her and Abram will doubtless take some time to recover. This is usually what happens when we decide to act independently of God. Our actions have consequences, often for much longer than we could ever imagine. The descendants of Ishmael are the Arab nations, and the conflict between Israel and the surrounding Arab nations still rumbles on today.

Let's move on into chapter 17. *When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram and said to him, I am Almighty God; walk before Me and be blameless. And I will make My covenant between Me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly. Then Abram fell on his face, and God talked with him, saying: As for Me, My covenant is with you, and you shall be a father of many nations. No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you.*

Also I give to you and your descendants after you the land in which you are a stranger, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting possession; and I will be their God. And God said to Abraham: As for you, you shall keep My covenant, you and your descendants after you throughout their generations. This is My covenant which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: every male child among you shall be circumcised. Genesis 17:1-10.

We move forward 13 years between chapters 16 and 17. Ishmael is growing up fast and he is still the only child of Abraham. The chapter starts with God pronouncing Himself to be *Almighty God*. The Hebrew expression is El Shaddai, and it might be translated as *All Sufficient God*. Abram and Sarai are about to see how great the sufficiency of God can be! The Almighty God restates His covenant with Abram and the promises belonging to it. He changes Abram's name from Abram, which means exalted father, to Abraham, which means father of a multitude. Abraham is promised that many nations will descend from him. He is told that God's covenant will not just be with Abraham but also with his descendants after him, and he is given the ritual of circumcision as a sign of that covenant. We get the New Testament teaching about circumcision in Colossians 2:11,12, where we read, *In [Christ] you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, buried with Him in baptism*. So, circumcision is about cutting off the old man and his sinfulness. It is a figure of putting something to death, so that there might be a new life, fully given to God. I'm not claiming that Abraham understood all that this meant, but he was expected to act in obedience. What the New Testament might call the *old man* or the *flesh* had been very active in chapter 16. That was now to be figuratively put away.

For the sake of time, we will skip over the verses that give more detail about who is to be circumcised and pick up again in verse 15. *Then God said to Abraham, As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. And I will bless her and also give her a son by you, then I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of peoples shall be from her. Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said in his heart, Shall a child be born to a man who is one hundred years old? And shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?*

And Abraham said to God, Oh, that Ishmael might live before You! Then God said. No, Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac; I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, and with his descendants after him. And as for Ishmael, I have heard you. Behold, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly. He shall beget twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation. But my covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this set time next year. Genesis 17:15-21.

Sarai was to have a change of name as well. She was no longer going to have a name meaning quarrelsome or bossy; but would become Sarah, meaning princess. Almighty God says twice over that He will bless Sarah, and He is explicit that Sarah will be the one who bears the son by whom all the promises to Abraham will be fulfilled. Sarah's own plan would have excluded her from direct involvement in this blessing, but God had greater plans for Sarah than she had for herself. Who knows what great plans God may have for you?

Abraham's first response to this great promise is to fall on his face and laugh! Sarah will react in exactly the same way in chapter 18. There is not much evidence of great faith here is there? The Bible always tells its stories honestly. We are not given airbrushed images of super-heroes with no flaws. We can see God at work building His great heroes of faith, but we get to see their

weaknesses as well. Incidentally, the name Isaac means *he will laugh*. The final laugh will not be one of scepticism and disbelief, but joy at the fulfilment of all God's promises. But we are getting a little ahead of ourselves.

Abraham spells out the problem to God, just in case He was missing the central difficulty. Abraham is 100 and Sarah is 90 – this just isn't happening! Then, in verse 18, Abraham offers God a helpful suggestion: *Oh, that Ishmael might live before You!*, he says. God's reply is brief and to the point. *No!* Abraham had not yet given up on Sarai's plan and the child that had resulted from it. Perhaps it was only natural that he should grow fond of one who was his own flesh and blood. Why could God not fulfil His promises through the lad? Why this wild talk of a son for Sarah? We all find it hard to let go of our personal dreams and schemes; especially those we have cherished for many years. I said at the start that learning is never easy, and that learning dependence is maybe one of the hardest lessons of all. Abraham was still in training, but Almighty God certainly wasn't about to give up!

God reiterates that the son will descend from Sarah as well as Abraham and gives us his name for the first time: Isaac. We need to pause and consider why it was so important that the son and heir should have Sarah for a mother. Was God just being stubborn by insisting on this point? We get an important insight from Galatians chapter 4 where we read, in verses 22 to 26, *Abraham had two sons: the one by a bondwoman, the other by a freewoman. But he who was of the bondwoman was born according to the flesh, and he of the freewoman through promise, which things are symbolic. For these are the two covenants: the one from Mount Sinai which gives birth to bondage, which is Hagar – for this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia, and corresponds to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children – but the Jerusalem above is free, which is the mother of us all.* God intended all of this to be an illustration of the difference between Israel and the church. Hagar is the bondwoman, and symbolises the old covenant, that is the Law given to Moses on Mount Sinai.

The law can only ever bring us into bondage, since we cannot keep it and it cannot set us free from our sins. It does not give new life, and remains connected to the flesh, i.e. our sinful life. Galatians 4:28 says, *Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are children of promise.* The church belongs to heaven and not earth, and inherits life and blessing according to God's promise. We see then why God insisted that Ishmael could not be the one by whom the promises were fulfilled.

Let's now read the final section of today's passage. *So Abraham took Ishmael his son, all who were born in his house and all who were bought with his money, every male among the men of Abraham's house, and circumcised the flesh of their foreskins that very same day, as God had said to him. Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. And Ishmael his son was thirteen years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. That very same day Abraham was circumcised, and his son Ishmael; and all the men of his house or bought with money from a foreigner, were circumcised with him.* Genesis 17:23-27.

Notice how Abraham obeys immediately and comprehensively in this matter of circumcision. This marks the restoration of his obedience and faith after the failure with Hagar. It shouldn't really surprise us that we find Abraham and Sarah making mistakes. Abraham was, like all of us, a work in progress: Sarah too. The dependence of faith didn't descend on them fully formed the day they left Ur of the Chaldees, and our faith is not fully fledged and flawless as soon as we become believers in the Lord Jesus. While we should never excuse our failures, neither should we become

discouraged or be tempted to give up whenever we make a mistake. Like Abraham and Sarah, we must keep on practising and keep on learning.

When the story of the birth of Isaac is referred to in Hebrews chapter 11 and Romans chapter 4, there is no mention of any failure on the part of Abraham or Sarah. How do we square this with what we have been reading in Genesis? I believe that the New Testament authors present to us the faith of Abraham at the end of the chapter we have read: when he has had the promise of God affirmed again, and fully believes that God will fulfil it in the following year. His faith has been tested and has grown. He has learnt to trust more and is increasingly exhibiting the dependence of faith. May God grant that our faith also should grow through the experiences He sends into our lives, and that we may not be discouraged by the challenges He uses to increase our dependence.

Thank you for listening to this Truth for Today talk on The Life of Abraham, The Dependence of Faith, Learning to Trust - Genesis chapters 16 and 17, talk number T1114.

(New King James Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated)

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