

**Chapter 16.** God had graciously entered into a unilateral covenant with Abram. All Abram had to do was believe and adopt the revelation he had been given as fact. Believing would change his thinking and thereby affect his behavior. Did it? This time we do not find those wonderful reassuring words “and Abram believed God and it was counted to him for righteousness.” In fact, by their actions, he and his wife seem to ignore God’s unilateral covenant. She wanted action, now! If she couldn’t have children of her own she would thrust her handmaid into her husband’s bosom. Ostensibly this was to give her children. Had she lost any hope of a natural child because of her age?

(Apparently customs of that age allowed concubinage, at least when the wife was barren. But note years later their son, Isaac, and his wife Rebecca never resorted to fleshly means to produce offspring. On the other hand his twin sons, Jacob and Esau, both had children by several concubines, none of which could be said to have been by faith.)

Abram had control of the situation and could have refused Sarai’s impatient urging by simply saying no. And he could have backed up his stand by simply refusing to participate. He failed to do either and allowed himself to be coaxed beyond his better judgement to go along with her fateful request.

*Galatians 6:7 Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. 8 For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting.*

What did he, his wife, his family, his descendants and the whole earth reap from his unbelief and taking matters in to his own hands? First off, a dysfunctional marriage and a dysfunctional household. Then there were descendants with dysfunctional relationships within their marriages and families. And later persistent strife festered between the descendants of Ishmael and Isaac, between the descendants of Jacob and Esau and then among the twelve tribes of Israel. For the almost four thousand years since their sinful adventure in proceeding without God, even until the present, the Middle East continues to be an uncontrollable, unresolvable hotbed of religious and international strife. It will continue until Abram’s Seed returns to reign. And it all began with the conception of Ishmael. We need to watch and be careful what we are doing in our daily lives. Are we walking by faith, resting upon Christ’s finished work and His promises? Or are we indulging the wisdom of the flesh, or its lusts, in some way? “The just shall live by faith.”

Sarai found out that pursuing her natural ambitions came back to bite her. Abram yielded to the temptation of his woman as had Adam at first. Neither exercised his given responsibility as head. If she knew her body periodically was indeed prepared to conceive normally perhaps she could have thought to pin the “blame” on her husband, Abram. If that was her thought, she was abruptly and unpleasantly

brought face to face with the truth. Her hand maid was pregnant and mocking her. Poor Sarai. She complained to her husband, blaming him for her frustration. He reacted as might have been expected of one acting in the flesh and reaping what he sowed. He washed his hands of the whole affair and gave Sarai permission to do whatever she wanted with her handmaid. Poor Hagar. A slave brought from Egypt, treated like a subhuman, given to her master to engage in the most intimate act envisioned between humans, but with neither the security of marriage vows or the love that God intends to accompany man and woman becoming one flesh. Paul’s comments on loveless intimacy is telling.

*1 Corinthians 6:15 Know ye not that your bodies are the members of Christ? shall I then take the members of Christ, and make them the members of an harlot? God forbid. 16 What? know ye not that he which is joined to an harlot is one body? for two, saith he, shall be one flesh. 17 But he that is joined unto the Lord is one spirit. 18 Flee fornication. Every sin that a man doeth is without the body; but he that committeth fornication sinneth against his own body. 19 What? know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own? 20 For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's. 7:1 Now concerning the things whereof ye wrote unto me: It is good for a man not to touch a woman. 2 Nevertheless, to avoid fornication, let every man have his own wife, and let every woman have her own husband. 3 Let the husband render unto the wife due benevolence: and likewise also the wife unto the husband.*

*Ephesians 5:28 So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself. 29 For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the church: 30 For we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones. 31 For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh. 32 This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church. 33 Nevertheless let every one of you in particular so love his wife even as himself; and the wife see that she reverence her husband.*

*Colossians 3:18 Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as it is fit in the Lord. 19 Husbands, love your wives, and be not bitter against them. 20 Children, obey your parents in all things: for this is well pleasing unto the Lord. See also Proverbs 30:24.*

Sarai heartlessly, it seems to us, acts harshly against her maid, making life unbearably miserable for her. They may have had quite a friendly confiding relationship until this for Sarai to have entrusted her to Abram. Pregnant, Hagar changed and Sarai did too. She blames Abram, rightly, for what happened. He discovered he had failed a test. A test he did not realize he was taking. A test not contrived in advance, but obviously, seen after the fact, a severe test of his love for her. She could conclude he clearly didn’t really love her after all! Had he ever? The mutual trusting love

they may have had before was strained beyond belief. Would it survive? Would their marriage survive?

Hagar had fled, probably spontaneously, unprepared to travel. Alone and likely terrified she found a flowing fountain and stopped by it. She was not quite alone! A marvelous thing occurred. None other than the Angel of Jehovah found her there.

(This is the first occasion He is named that in the Bible. This was none other than God the Son in angelic form. His Name, “Angel of Jehovah” is repeated no less than four times in this account. By this name He appears many times in the scriptures, 62 times in the O.T., 18 in the N.T.)

Here she was, an Egyptian, a Gentile slave, fleeing the wrath of her mistress whose position as wife she had foolishly mocked. She was on the road back to Egypt. But she is intercepted by the same gentle, reassuring God that met and encouraged Abram after his successful rout of the kings of the east. She frankly tells Him she is fleeing from the face of her Mistress. He quietly asked where she is coming from and where she was going. (A good way to approach someone obviously in distress.) He then assured her of a son, a safe birthing and named him Ishmael. He commanded her to return to her unhappy mistress and to submit herself to her. But first He reassured her of His loving care by giving her a promise of His blessing upon her son and even forecasting his character and his future. With God’s personal blessing upon her unborn son ringing in her ears and embedded in her heart she trustingly obeyed. She was deeply touched and understood the significance of her personal encounter with the God of Abram. She had most likely heard much about Him while serving her mistress for 10 years. Now she knew He knew her, and she knew Him.

We would like to say she boldly gave the well its name. But she didn’t. No, she did more than that. She, in faith and gratitude, undertook to name Him who had seen her, He had been watching over her in her plight and flight. So she named Him?! Has anyone ever presumed to name God? She named Him “Thou God Seest Me.” The well came to be called “Beerlahairoi.” In Hebrew it is “well of a living (One), my Seer.”

Sarai and Abram’s handling of this whole affair seems so selfish, so unfair, so inept. And it was. We are not told specifically what happened when Hagar returned in a submissive manner. Wouldn’t we like to believe it broke their hearts? — but there is no indication of this. Only that she indeed bore Abram a son. And he named him Ishmael, “God will hear”—the name given to her by the Angel of Jehovah. HE had said the name was announced to her because Jehovah had heard her affliction. Abram publically called Hagar’s newborn baby boy his son. And by naming him Ishmael he humbly and publicly acknowledged His part the whole affair. The negligence and carelessness that had

led to God finding it necessary to meet Hagar in the wilderness.

(A repentant heart always produces fruit signaling its repentance. This may seem to be quite subtle as was Abram’s in this case. But his repentance was indeed genuine, though perhaps not yet as full as it would be. We need to earnestly watch for fruit signaling repentance of a brother or sister we are concerned about. We are not permitted to demand it take a certain form. That is God’s prerogative. We are to be faithfully and graciously alert for any sign of repentance.)

Abram had been in the land ten years when the baby was conceived, and he was eighty six when Ishmael was born. There followed thirteen silent years before Jehovah re-entered the picture. Years when Ishmael could have been instructed in righteousness and respect for Abram’s God, Jehovah. Was he? There is little evidence that Abram was diligent in raising this son in the Lord, though Abram’s attentiveness to instructing his House was commended after Isaac was born. Ishmael turned out predictably, and as predicted, a wild, untamable, self sufficient troublemaker, standing alone against all others and drawing the attacks of all others. Yet he was fiercely loyal to those of “his people,” and they to him. Sound familiar? He was a man with an incurably disturbed heart that had sensed his rejection from birth. Childhood experiences are formative and can profoundly influence a person’s character through adolescence and into adulthood. But scripture does not allow these to be cited as excuses for one’s personal behavior. Yet those adults whose behavior or neglect have affected a child adversely do bear some responsibility for his character. God has faithfully recorded numerous examples of parental favoritism, and worse, preferential treatment, and its consequences. Solomon, in the book of Proverbs also faithfully warns parents, even though he himself might be counted as a victim of parental favoritism. Yet God never forsakes one of His own but also faithfully, with a trial we may have brought upon ourselves, provides a way of escape.

Abram accepted Ishmael as his son, but he seemed to have given up on God’s promise of a son through Sarai. Next we read that thirteen years later God confronted him with his unbelief and reiterated His original promise— a son by Sarai. God doesn’t forget or go back on His promises or His plan.

Note that in Galatians (4:21-31) Paul uses the account of the two sons of Abram/Abraham by the bond woman Hagar and the free woman Sarah, as figurative of Israel under the Law and the Christian under grace, to warn the Gentile believers from putting themselves under the Law.

By Ronald Canner, June 16, 2010