

Relationships – Good and Bad.

Genesis 16:1-16 & 21:8-14 John 14:12-21 Galatians 4:21-31

One of the most gratifying things that parents encounter is to witness the happy marriage of their children. Conversely, the most agonising events that parents can face is the marriage breakdown of their children which is compounded if grandchildren are involved. My wife and I have encountered all three experiences.

There are good and bad things that happen to all of us and when such events take place they provoke a different reaction e.g. at bad times we seem to question: Why me? However, God has a plan for our life provided we listen to His voice and follow His direction. Whether we know it or not, God is trying to lead us to untold blessings He has prepared for us, both here and in eternity, but we must keep our faith on track. Any deviation from the plan of God can lead to disaster so we need to choose our direction well. Although poor choices may hurt in minor ways for a while, the longer we continue, the more harm they bring especially in the choice of relationships. Consequently, there is no better place to examine relationships than in the marriage of Abraham and Sarah.

God made a covenant with Abraham that guaranteed he would have a son but he said nothing about Abraham's barren wife as the mother. Could God still give a child to Sarah in her old age? Sarah had grown old and given up hope of having children. So she decided to give her personal slave, an Egyptian woman named Hagar, to her husband as a second wife. Among the wealthy, this was a common solution to the problem of barrenness. As Sarah's slave, Hagar served as an extension of Sarah, and any children she might have would be legally counted as Sarah's. Hagar had no say in the matter. Although Sarah proposed the plan to Abraham, it was not her idea. The culture of the time considered it the wife's responsibility to produce an heir for her husband, one way or another. If she couldn't give Abraham an heir, she had to find someone who could as she must have been under immense societal pressure to fulfil her duty to her husband.

As Adam obeyed Eve, Abraham obeyed Sarah. Each man betrayed his role as the head of the family with disastrous results. Hagar had no trouble conceiving and soon realized she was pregnant. Sarah's scheme to help God keep his promise initially seemed successful but trouble would soon follow when Hagar gave birth to a son called Ishmael.

Eventually, Abraham's life was in danger of going completely off course when he came to the crossroads of decision in his life and had to end his relationship with Hagar. Our Bible reading earlier described Abraham's decision to ignore God's plan and listen his wife Sarah's strategy to provide him with a child. Sarah might have been wrong for suggesting he have a child by Hagar, but once she saw the incompatibility of the son of promise and the son of the bondwoman she was right in telling Abraham to cast out Hagar and her son. Ironically, by this time Abraham was emotionally attached to Hagar and Ishmael.

What seems harsh can sometimes be lifesaving because God would take care of Hagar and her child and this is recorded in Genesis chapter 21. Yet for the time being there had to be a parting of ways. Although Abraham couldn't see it then, he would understand later the reasons why he had to kiss Hagar good-bye:

- Their relationship was a mistake.
- What the relationship had produced.
- God was calling Abraham onward.

1. Their relationship was a mistake.

a. Hagar was not necessarily evil but she was a detour from God's plan. She helped Abraham to feel comfortable in his unbelief. Sometimes we build relationships with persons or attachment to things, though they may not be a source of evil, they are unprofitable just the same. The apostle Paul said it this way, "*All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful; all things are lawful for me, but not all things edify.*" (1 Cor. 10:23) It takes maturity to know the difference between things that are helpful and things that are detrimental to our walk with God. Although there might not be a commandment against something or against associating with a particular person, we need to ask if this thing or this person will lead me off track?

I was engaged to a lovely Christian girl for 3 years but God told each of us that we should not progress to marriage. There was nothing immoral in the relationship and we were not living together but thankfully we both were obedient to the leading of the Holy Spirit. I would never have met my life partner if I had disobeyed. However, the break was difficult and emotions caused distress at the time to both of us. If you are in a relationship in which there is some doubt – end it! God honours faithfulness.

I believe it is more difficult for a girl to break a relationship as she might think it would forfeit her only chance of marriage but better to have a broken heart for a while than suffer a broken marriage and

a lifetime of regret. Arranged marriages can be a blessing. Sometimes parents can see incompatible differences between their offspring and their chosen partner which are usually unseen by the couple involved. The problem is that young people do not usually listen to the advice of their parents. However, if an “outsider” spells out the potential disaster of a relationship, their advice has a better chance of being heeded. The best solution is for individuals to hearken to the voice of God and do what He says. When we meet our chosen partner we will know and not have to ask the question: Is this the one? We will have that quiet assurance and peace about God’s choice for us.

b. Hagar represented everything in which we trust and which we hold onto instead of God. When God’s plan becomes difficult to follow we often insert our own directions and ideas to “help God out.” I tend to hold the position of God’s Advisor but He never listens to my advice. The fortunate thing is that the solutions He provides to issues are far better than my options and which invariably are ones I never even considered.

We feel that we must understand before we can obey and yet our minds are only on the natural. Therefore, we look for the tangible in the intangible, the visible from the invisible and the temporal in the eternal. We’ll do anything to understand except wait and obey. Oswald Chambers wrote, “All God’s revelations are sealed to us until they are opened to us by obedience... God will never reveal more about himself until you have obeyed what you know already.” That is sound advice which I apply to guidance – until I take the first step in obeying God’s plan, the next step will not be revealed.

2. What the relationship had produced.

Abraham had to kiss Hagar good-bye because of what the relationship had produced.

a. Ishmael was a product of unbelief. Sarah may have initiated the relationship between the two, but it was Abraham who cultivated it. This was not the way God had planned to fulfil His promise but the decision was made to go ahead with the plan before it was too late. I once saw a tapestry of a beautiful scene but when I looked at the back it was a total mess. Coloured threads were sticking out here and there with no semblance of a picture. When we are in tune with the Holy Spirit, we don’t look at the mess of threads but rather look at the beautiful pictures when viewed correctly.

b. Ishmael represented the work of man to fulfil the promise of

God. Romans 14:23 tells us that "*Whatever is not from faith is sin.*" We cannot altar the plan of God for our lives and still end up at the same destination. God could not have fulfilled His promise to Abraham through Ishmael because Ishmael was not the son of promise—the son of faith. Ishmael was Abraham's attempt to do what only God could do.

I was friendly with a man who was principal of a Bible School. He had a fantastic ministry which touched countless lives but he lived a life of regret. When he was younger, God called him to be a missionary to China and he refused to go at the time. He always wondered what would have happened if he had been obedient.

c. Ishmael represented what Abraham loved as well as a reflection of himself. It was easy for Sarah to tell Abraham to "cast out" Hagar. There was no emotional conflict on her part. There was no attachment. There was no longing in her heart with which to struggle. Ishmael was Abraham's son, but he was not Sarah's son and even though she had made the arrangement by which he was born, there would never beat in Sarah's heart the same love that throbbed in Abraham's veins.

3. God was calling Abram onward.

a. Abraham had to kiss Hagar goodbye because God was calling him onward. Abraham could not find the blessings of God in the failures of yesterday. He would have liked God to have blessed what he had done because he wanted things to stay the way they were. After all, what harm could there be in the son of promise and the son of the bondwoman growing up together? Abraham could have kept things the way they were but there comes a point in our lives when we must deal with the failures of yesterday. We cannot continue as if nothing has happened, as if no wrong has been done, as if we have not erred from God's plan. If we don't deal with our mistakes, after a while, our mistakes will mock our miracles.

b. Secondly, Abraham could not walk into the future shackled to the failures of yesterday. He was bound to the bondwoman but he was about to learn that we must be willing to walk away from the failures of yesterday. We must do whatever it takes to be free from the bondwoman. It may appear that others are being blessed without having to do what God has asked us to do, but we should not concern ourselves with what appears to be the case. God has a plan for us so we need to kiss our Hagar's good-bye because

God is calling us onward! However, when we analyse our life we can truthfully say that we draw nearer to God when we go through a valley experience. A valley of regret is a vast virtual space in our mind and a fertile ground for emotions like doubt and regret to grow into dominant negative forces. The valley of regret is where short-term details always seem to overwhelm the long-term focus, resulting in a bad case of myopia. We will always do better by looking long term at any issue with eternity in mind.

One of my sons started a new school and made friends with boys who were interested in football, football and more football.

However, after a few weeks it became apparent to my son that the character of these friends left a lot to be desired and he broke away from them. It was difficult at the time but he knew it was the right thing to do. His decision proved correct later in life when the boys in question encountered difficulties with the law.

Ramifications

Abraham and Sarah's mistake had long term effects from which we are suffering today because Ishmael is important in the religion of Islam. The Qur'an says that he was a prophet and an apostle and Arabic Muslims trace a lot of their lineage back to Ishmael. In the book of Genesis an angel of the Lord had a conversation with Hagar and told her, "*Return to your mistress, and submit yourself under her hand*" (Genesis 16:9). The key word is "submit." The word *Muslim* means "one who submits," and Muslims believe that Abraham coined the term. Today one cannot speak out about Islam without fear of retribution from the 5% Muslim population in the UK.

There is growing pressure to marginalize Christianity and ultimately dominate it by using the law to suppress religious freedom and we can trace the root cause back to Abraham and Sarah's big mistake. Therefore we should review our lifestyle and root out anything or any relationship that is offensive to God before any bad ramifications affect not only us but others.