

A TRAGIC BLUNDER

Genesis 16:1-12

After the experience recorded in Genesis 15, one might have thought that Abraham would have been enabled to continue along the pathway of God's will without hesitation or trouble. But, from experience we know the proneness of the believer to blunder and fall into error and sin all through his earthly pilgrimage no matter how far advanced his course or mature his experience. In Genesis 16, we come upon the record of another shadow which fell on Abraham's life. He was brought face to face with a temptation, and for lack of spiritual perception he fell into the snare which led to serious and far-reaching consequences.

Affairs were somewhat snarled in the household of the patriarch Abraham. He and his wife, Sarah, wanted a son. In fact, he had been promised a son, but there was no visible evidence of this promise being fulfilled as Sarah was restrained by Jehovah from child-bearing. Her advancing age of seventy-five years was rendering this more and more apparent every day. As the time of waiting grew longer, Sarah's faith weakened.

I. The Serious Mistake. Genesis 16:1-3.

There is no evidence that it had been clearly revealed to Sarah that she was to be the mother of the promised seed, and this fact probably caused her to be impatient. Tired of waiting for a child and without much hope of having one, Sarah made the proposal to Abraham that he make a secondary wife or concubine of her Egyptian handmaid, whose name was Hagar, and have a child or children by her.

While the suggestion of Sarah on this occasion seems to us very strange and unnatural, archaeological discoveries show that she was acting on what was a common custom at the time. Law 144 of the code of Hammurabi, the mighty king who reigned over Babylon in the days of Abraham, distinctly allowed a married woman to do what Sarah did here. Hagar, as bonds slave, was the personal property of her mistress, "a living chattel," and any child of the bonds slave would necessarily belong to the mistress and not the mother.

It was very evident that Sarah believed that Abraham was to have the seed promised by God. She had a strong desire that her husband should no longer be debarred from the realization of that promise through her apparently permanent sterility. It is obvious then that her suggestion to Abraham meant a very genuine piece of self-denial. Her conduct in giving Hagar to her husband evinced genuine humility and self-denial in yielding to another the honor of being the mother of Abraham's seed and intense devotion to her husband in submitting for his sake to a displacement which must have carried anguish to her heart. The practice was a very common one, and Sarah was but the creature of her age in urging Abraham to do as many others did.

Even though such conduct was perfectly legal and widely prevalent and Sarah's motive was unselfish and sacrificial, the proposal was wrong. It was wrong in itself and wrong in its method of obtaining the end sought. It was wrong against God, Whose promise had been given and Whose time should have been waited. It was wrong against Abraham, leading him out of the pathway of patient waiting for the accomplishment of God's will. It was wrong against Hagar and did not recognize her individuality and rights in the matter. It was wrong against Sarah herself because it robbed her of a high privilege as well as led her to disobedience.

The suggestion that Sarah made to Abraham was a testing of the patience of his faith. God had said to him, "I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee and make thy name great" (Genesis 12:2). He had also said, "Look now toward heaven, and tell the stars, if thou be able to number them; and He said unto him, So shall thy seed be" (Genesis 15:5). Yet, ten years had elapsed, and Abraham was childless still. When God repeated His promise, "Abram believed in the Lord" (Genesis 15:6), but he was left to wait for the fulfillment of it. Waiting is what the natural heart finds so hard to endure. Rather than wait, man prefers to take the management of his affairs into his own hands and use human expediences to give effect to the divine promise. It is one thing to commit our way unto the Lord, but it is quite another to trust also in Him and wait until He brings it to pass.

"And Abram hearkened to the voice of Sarai." The father of the human race, Adam, sinned by hearkening to his wife, and here the father of the faithful, Abraham, follows his example. These things are recorded for our learning. Frequently, a man's foes are those of his own household. Sarah and Abraham made a serious mistake by trying to help God out. Abraham was wrong when he failed to see that God could give him seed and fill the earth with people without him doing something special to assist God in doing what He had promised to do. Did you ever try to help God out? It is so hard just to trust God and let Him do things. I read of a little girl who came in from the garden and who looked as though she had been doing something, so her mother asked her what she had been doing. She said, "I have been helping God." The mother asked, "What have you been doing?" The little girl replied, "I have been helping God open the roses." Well, you know what the result was. We can't help God open roses. God can do many things Himself, and, if He does them, they will be done right.

I read the story of a woman who was given for her collection a cocoon of an emperor moth, and I suppose that the one who gave it to her did not know that the insect was alive. One day the woman noticed that the end of the cocoon was broken and that the insect inside was trying to get out. She watched it, and it struggled and struggled and struggled to get out. Finally, it got its little head out. It struggled and then quieted down and waited until its strength returned and struggled again. It seemed that it was not making any progress. She watched it over a period of a couple of days, and it seemed as though it would never get out, so she took a little pair of scissors and snipped that cocoon a bit, just enough to let that beautiful emperor moth come out. It tried to spread its wings, and it tumbled from one side to another. It was a poor, pitiable thing that could not fly. When she inquired about it, a scientist told her that all of that struggling was necessary. Those beautiful and matchless wings were folded tight to the body; there was no strength in them and very little color in them. However, as the light would get into that cocoon and the juices of the body were pressed out and into the wings by the struggling, they took on strength and color, and, by the time the moth had gotten out in God's way, it would be perfect. The woman by trying to help out had spoiled the work of God.

After ten years of waiting, Abraham's patience began to be exhausted. Like him, if we become impatient with God, we shall not have our prayers answered as we would like to have them, and we may be influenced to interfere in God's dealings with us but always to our own disadvantage. From this incident in the life of Abraham, we learn that a long experience of walking with God and experiencing His guidance and enjoying His promises does not render us immune from a lapse of faith, a weak decision or a spiritual blunder. Continual dependence on God is our only safeguard.

Sarah's proposal to Abraham only introduced confusion and disharmony. This is always the case when the law is brought in alongside the gospel. Works cannot be added to faith where justification is desired or involved.

II. The Sad Results. Genesis 16:4-6.

The outcome of Abraham's yielding to the temptation from Sarah was evidenced quickly.

1. Pride. Verse 4.

Hagar's prospect of motherhood caused her to adopt a superior air towards Sarah. "Her mistress was despised in her eyes." Hagar's haughtiness was perfectly natural, and her reproach of her mistress was quite inevitable. Quite likely Hagar assumed an air of superiority as if, in consequence of her approaching motherhood, she anticipated replacing Sarah on the throne of Abraham's love.

2. Jealousy. Verse 5.

Human nature remains the same, and this reproach stung Sarah deeply. It is surprising that Sarah's perception did not forewarn her of these undesirable results, the pride of Hagar and her own jealousy. When the suggestion, which she herself had made, turned out to have the opposite effect from what she had intended and anticipated, Sarah blamed Abraham. This was a strange and unfair attitude in view of the fact that the entire proposal was strictly her own. She told her husband that she hoped the injury to her would be returned to him.

3. Misery. Verse 6.

Hagar was impudent, and quick-tempered Sarah became increasingly jealous and bitter. Neither tried to understand the other's point of view, so wounded pride wrought mutual misunderstandings, resulting in ill feeling and open hatred.

To a noble spirit like that of Abraham, the anguish of Sarah must have been distressing to behold, and the pain which it occasioned must have been intensified when he came to realize the painful dilemma in which he stood between her and Hagar. He could not interfere because Hagar was Sarah's absolute property. He was compelled to accept the inevitable. Abraham merely said that she could do anything she desired with Hagar. However, it must be emphasized that Abraham was responsible for his sins in this whole affair. The fact that Sarah had made the suggestion to Abraham was no justification for his conduct. He could have refused to do wrong, but he failed to do so. Therefore, it is not surprising that he, too, was miserable.

4. Injustice. Verse 6.

Hagar was at once thrust back into her original condition of servitude and subjected to injurious treatment at the hands of her incensed mistress. Law 146 of the code of Hammurabi allowed the mistress to reduce the maid to the position of a slave again. While it seems to us that Abraham acted unfairly to Hagar, he was in fact only conceding to Sarah what was her absolute right according to Babylonian law. Sarah finally made it so unpleasant for Hagar that she had to flee from Abraham's camp and take refuge in the wilderness.

III. The Special Interposition. Genesis 16:7-12.

Near the edge of the desert, just before she cut herself off from the land of her adoption, Hagar sat down to rest by a fountain of water. Doubtless her countenance was pale with grief, and tears of bitter sorrow ran down her cheeks. But, she had no one to quarrel with except herself, and she soon tired of that. She felt sorry for herself, and she probably regretted her folly also. She had left a comfortable home and knew not which way to turn. So she sat down to think, which is always an effective cure for tantrums. Fortunately the nearby fountain of refreshing water slaked her thirst and cooled her ire.

There wasn't anyone with whom she could converse, which made matters even worse, for when anything is wrong with us we like to have someone to listen to our troubles. While all alone, without any help, advice or hope, an angel suddenly appeared to her and

gently asked her where she came from and whither she was going. Without any apparent fear she proceeded to tell her story. Then, addressing her in kind, tender and affectionate terms, the angel gave her some good advice. "And the angel of the Lord said unto her, Return to thy mistress, and submit thyself under her hands." That was about the last thing she had thought of doing. Although it was hard for her to do so, she was assured by the angel that it was the only thing for her to do. Then the angel gave her the wonderfully encouraging promise that she should bear a son who would afterwards rise to great power and honor, whereupon she was instantly inspired with wonder, love and praise.