

# Genesis 16, The Beginning of Hope in the Promises of God: A Life of Abraham, Preached by Michael Gunn @ Harambee Church on February 24<sup>th</sup>, 2008

*“Sexuality is designed by God as a way to know God in Christ more fully...and that knowing God more fully is designed as a way of guarding and guiding our sexuality.”*

John Piper

## Intro

In the past few weeks we have seen the sublime nature of Abram as he has been walking with God, and listening to Him, and growing in his faith. He humbly allowed Lot to choose where he wanted to live, he courageously fought to get Lot back from warlords, and he paid homage to Melchizedek, the king of Salem (Peace), who no doubt is at least a type of Christ. Just like any one of us, we can be walking in faith, and still have the real ability to fail God miserably. As we saw last week, we can have faith that saves us, properly placing our identity in Christ, and really desire to follow Him, but we still struggle with the power of sin in our lives (See **Romans 6-7**). Since we are still in this world, we will still struggle with sins lure, which presents a conflict of interest as to what ultimately brings joy in our lives. This is where we are this week in Abram's walk of faith with his Lord.

## From the Head...

Last week Abram's main concern was the barrenness of his wife, which as we stated would have been a horrendous shame to their family in their culture. Fertility rites, and the need to produce many children in order to protect and work the fields dominated their culture. Not having children was akin to being poor with no hope to be protected against killers and marauders. Women were seen as a means to guaranteeing posterity and protection. There is no doubt that this reflected some broken values in their culture, but no less than our own culture that tells women they have to be skinny to be loved, accepted and significant.

Last week we saw that Isaiah 54 reminded us that in God's timing the barren women would sing (Verse 1), because their maker would be their husband (Verse 5). This is significant, because no longer would their worth need to be placed in being fertile; it could be placed in being married to their maker. Unfortunately though, we often struggle with our identity, and place our worth and significance into the hands of people and things. Most of our sins are subtle sins of the heart that desires to be loved and accepted so much we will make decisions that will affect that change, rather than make godly decisions that feed off the love and acceptance we have in Christ.

This is where Abram is. He and Sarai so badly want a family, so that their dishonor could dissipate. They are struggling with the promise of grace. God has promised them children, and maybe in their mind the promise relied on their pragmatic ability to make it work on their own terms? Maybe God needs me to accomplish His will? This is the problem with pragmatics. It makes sense at the time, and it usually works great! The problem is we aren't often asking if it is God's will and the right thing to do. After all, the Lord is "Preventing" Sarai from having children, so "*He must want me to exercise a cultural custom to make it work?*" Or maybe, "*This marriage is horrible, and God wants me to be happy, maybe He's telling me it is time to leave?*" How about, "*God hasn't really provided the job I need, so I'm just not going to give anything right now!*" It is easy to justify our actions based on desires that aren't met. When our desires for things outweigh our desire for God, we will act in ways that are ungodly in order to achieve the level of desire we are aiming at.

In our story, Abram listens "*To the voice of Sarai.*" She hasn't been a major player in this story so far, but she enters with a vengeance now. Her desire has become intolerable, and her frustration level is high. It is possible that she made this offer thinking Abram wouldn't take her up on it, or that she made it to prove that she isn't the barren one. Whatever her reasons are she made the request in a vehement way. "*Go in to my maid*" is in the imperative. This is not a suggestion; it's a command. I don't want to read into their marriage relationship, but it appears that Abram's leadership falls apart completely. The trust he has built up over the past few years seems to be thrown away at the request of his wife, who is misleading the agenda. Her desires have seemingly eradicated logic and prayerful reasoning in this situation.

As usual with pragmatic theology, which looks to the moment to solve the problem versus looking at principles that are true in all situations, the problems only multiply. What appears to be the right thing to do becomes the disastrous thing to do (**Proverbs 14:12**). While our passage isn't just about a sexual sin (This sin is the result of a desire that isn't placed properly in the will of God), there is a reason why God wants Abram to have this child with Sarai, his covenanted wife. I would like to take a moment to look at the sexuality in this instance, since our desires gone wild, often result in sexual sins.

It seems clear throughout scripture that one man and one woman make up a married relationship, which is reflective of two things about God. **First**, He is a covenant God who makes covenants with His people, and that covenant is always seen between Him and His bride (Singular). As a matter of fact anything more than that is seen as spiritual adultery. **Secondly**, God Himself lives in a triune community that reflects both unity and diversity. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit live in perfect love and harmony, and unity, yet they are distinct persons from one another. Subsequently marriage is a

reflection of this unity and diversity. Men and women are distinct, yet one in marriage, reflective of the God that created them. Therefore pastor John Piper writes, “*Sexuality is designed by God as a way to know God in Christ more fully...and that knowing God more fully is designed as a way of guarding and guiding our sexuality.*” Let’s unpack this a bit.

**First**, that our sexuality is designed as a way to know God more fully. God has given us strong sexual desires, and that sexual desire, when carried out in a committed marriage covenant, gives us a picture of the intense intimacy of knowing Christ supremely. Sexual intimacy is the quintessential of “Knowing” someone intimately. It is reserved for one person, as our knowledge of Christ is reserved for knowledge of one God (See **Ezekiel 16; Ephesians 5:25-27; Revelation 19:9**).

**Secondly**, that knowing God guides and guards our sexuality. There is a huge difference in knowing about God, and knowing God intimately as discussed previously. Any sexual sin (Whether it is performed by those with full knowledge of God or nor) is a result of not having intimacy with our loved one (**Hosea 2:14-16, 19-20; Romans 1:23-28; 1 Thessalonians 4:3-5; 2 Peter 1:3-4**). When we do not have an intimate relationship with God, we remain at the mercy of our passions, which will consume us, because they do not ultimately assuage our desire for love (**1 Peter 1:14-15; Ephesians 4:22**). We become enslaved to our passions and then call this enslavement love.

Any sexual act outside of this union is wrong because it deconstructs the sexual function from being pro-creative, emotionally satisfying and God glorifying to being only emotionally satisfying without the commitment of the other two. When we try and destroy the oneness (Heterosexual sin) or distinction (Homosexual sin), we destroy the glory and supremacy of Christ in the sexual act. This too results from an over desire to have intimacy with someone else more than we do with God. Once the nature of God is rejected, anything goes in our actions including our sexuality.

This is a lot on sexuality, when in reality the passage is reminding us that we can fall away from God easily be pragmatically trying to induce God’s blessing through our own means rather than trusting in the promises of God. But it is important to look at such a sin, that enslaves most of us, and take a long look at the sin behind the sin, which is idolatry, and the desire to fulfill all of our desires outside of what we were created for, which is to give thanks and praise to God. This is what Abram and Sarai did. They so badly wanted the blessing they failed to see God as that blessing, and pragmatically (And culturally acceptable) made a decision to fulfill the promise outside of God’s will.

Immediately we see that this sin produced conflict (Which sin usually does), and once again we see the grace of God working in the lives of humanity, and God’s concern for all people. Although Ishmael was conceived illegitimately, and that he is not the child of promise, God blesses him, and makes him a great nation too, but the consequences of this union would haunt Israel until this day. The offspring of Ishmael would become the seed for the Arabic people who still live in the area around Sinai, and who still hate the Jews. It is interesting that Islam, the religion in the Middle East that represents this hate for the Jews differentiates in this one area; who is the chosen child? Isaac or Ishmael? The Jews of course say Isaac (As do the Christians), and Islam says it is Ishmael. What a tangled web our sin weaves! What we must realize though is that God is concerned for Ishmael, and ultimately the great people that Ishmael represents. God’s grace is poured out on all nations, and we are not to see them as the enemy, but as those that also need to hear the gospel of Christ.

#### **...to the Heart**

It is so easy to think that we have “Accepted Jesus into our hearts,” and somehow, magically we become the finished product, and all of God’s promises are fulfilled in our lives. But we, like Abram and Sarai, are a work in progress, and there will be many times in our lives that our doubts, and our desires will get the best of us, even when we are trying to please God with our desires. There will be times when we will give in to the desire to try and please God through your own works, instead of allowing God’s promise to be fulfilled in you. This of course never negates our need to be obedient to Christ, but that obedience should be a result of our identity and not in our desire for God to accept us any more than He does in Christ.

**Books for further study:** *Genesis*, Walter Brueggemann, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: Genesis*, Victor P. Hamilton, *Genesis*, Bruce Waltke, *The Word Biblical Commentary: Genesis*, Gordon J. Wenham, *The NIV Application Commentary: Genesis*, John H. Walton, *Creation and Blessing*, Allen P. Ross

**Next Weeks Verses:** Genesis 17

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