



A Post Tenebras Lux Sunday Sermon...

The Everlasting Shortcut...

Genesis 16:1-16

Father, we come to you this morning confessing to you our great need. Father we need and we desire that the Holy Spirit come now and take the things of Christ and make them real to our hearts...to come and take the written word and as its true author and therefore its infallible teacher to instruct us in the truth of your Son. Open the book we pray to see what you have accomplished on our behalf, in Christ, in whose name, we pray, Amen.

Chapter twenty-two of the Book of Genesis contains the greatest single moment from the extraordinary life of Abraham...Abraham...the fountainhead of both the Jewish nation and more importantly of all those who come to God on the basis of faith alone in Christ alone. Genesis twenty-two contains the story of his obedience...his outrageous obedience to the outrageous command from God to offer his son, his only son Isaac, as a burnt offering on the heights of Mount Moriah.

The command of God was a test of Abraham's faith and it was a test that Abraham passed with flying colors. You see Abraham had come to believe the promise of God...had come to believe that it would be fulfilled by God and not by any clever manipulation of God or of God's commands or creatures...as a

result, he simply obeyed God's command and did what God told him to do. He obeyed God...leaving God to sort out the details...leaving God to make good on His promises His own way.

It was a lesson he had learned the hard way...a lesson he had learned in the self-taught academy of affliction, of the isolated alcoves of the hallowed halls of heartbreak...in the lonely study cells of the school of suffering and sorrow. It was a lesson in which he himself had been both teacher and object lesson and student. You see Abraham had already come to know the woes of the way of the shortcut...had already come to know the slippery steps of the easy path of near obedience...of half obedience.

He came to know it up close and personal in Genesis chapter 16.

Now that in and of itself is not really all that strange. We all learn lessons in God's school of discipline. We all learn lessons and forget them...as soon as we can...as soon as the pain of the moment subsides...but Abraham learned his lessons well...he retained the memory of rightly conjugating the verb **"to obey"** in all its tenses...and he did so because of the everlasting consequences of an everlasting shortcut.

Let me explain what I mean.

In chapter fifteen, the chapter we read earlier this morning, Abraham received an extraordinary promise from God. Let me set the scene for you. Abraham had received word that his nephew Lot and his whole household had been taken in captivity by a band of marauding Sumerians. They had been taken into captivity

along with wealth and many of the important people of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham took the men of his household and tracked them down and rescued them and brought them back to their homes. When he did, he returned the wealth and the people belonging to the King of Sodom. The King of Sodom offered to give Abraham all of the riches of Sodom for his service...but Abraham told him, **"No...I don't want it. I have made a vow unto the Lord not to take anything from you. I don't want anyone to say that the King of Sodom made me rich."**

Now I have no idea how the King of Sodom felt about that kind of response...but the King of Heaven liked it very much. The beginning verses of chapter fifteen show His pleasure.

^{NIV} **Genesis 15:1**...After this, the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: **"Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward."**

Do you see what the Lord is saying? It seems to me He is saying, **"Abraham you did well not to succumb to the wealth offered by the King of Sodom. I will take care of you. I will remember my promise and will protect you and provide for you all I have said."**

Of course what happens in the rest of chapter fifteen is that God cuts an everlasting covenant with Abraham to assure him of His promise to him.

Now the scene described there is extraordinary...which was why I wanted to take the time to read it to you earlier. You see God told Abraham to take a heifer, a goat and ram and kill them and cut them in half and place opposite each

other...something like fence posts on a pathway. At the end of this gruesome path he was to put two birds, a dove and young pigeon opposite each other.

You see the ceremony is the ceremony of the blood oath and the picture involves two men making an agreement and killing an animal and walking between the two parts and saying by their action, **“Should either one of us ever break our agreement...our covenant with each other let what happened to this animal happen to him.”**

It was a bloody gruesome scene...it was a very solemn sort of audiovisual contract.

And in the case of Genesis 15, there was even a time element attached to the contract. You see the four fence posts, the four markers...the two parts of the severed heifer, the two parts of the severed goat, the two parts of the severed ram and the two birds opposite each other signified four hundred years...four hundred years of captivity in the nation in Egypt...at the end of which the nation of Israel would be delivered. Many scholars think that the two birds at the end of the path signify that the nation would fly away in freedom. I think that is probably right.

Anyway, God told Abraham to arrange the animal parts and then God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Abraham and then He came down from heaven and walked through the severed pieces of the animals in the form of a smoking firepot...the exact same images used later on in Exodus to show His leading of the nation of Israel in the dessert...the pillar of fire and the pillar of smoke. And

the significance of His doing that was that God was making a unilateral, one-sided covenant with Abraham.

He was saying to Abraham, **"This covenant between you and me does not depend upon you. I am making this promise apart from you and I will keep it as I promised. Abraham...know that my promise is true."**

Now chapter 16 follows right after that...and it is so strange and unexpected that it almost takes your breath away. I find myself reading the text and talking to Abraham...**"Abraham, don't do it. Wait...wait for God...wait for the promise...you do not know how much misery you are about to cause...wait."**

But he doesn't wait. He forgets the everlasting covenant and takes an everlasting shortcut. Now the idea to act was not initially Abraham's idea...it was Sarah's idea and when you read the text I think you are intended to think back to Adam and to Eve. The woman makes the mistake but the man joins in willingly. Look at verse one.

^{NIV} **Genesis 16:1**...Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. But she had an Egyptian maidservant named Hagar; ² so she said to Abram, **"The LORD has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my maidservant; perhaps I can build a family through her."** Abram agreed to what Sarai said. ³ So after Abram had been living in Canaan ten years, Sarai his wife took her Egyptian maidservant Hagar and gave her to her husband to be his wife.

Do you see what Sarah is saying? She is saying, **"My husband the Lord has made a covenant with you but he has prevented me from having children. Perhaps it is time to act on our own...to act apart from the promise of**

God...apart from the Word of God...let us take advantage of the means at hand...so that I can build my own family."

Now the funny thing about Sarah's idea...the idea of using her servant Hagar as a surrogate mother was perfectly in keeping with the law of the day. The ancient Code of Hammurabi mentions this very idea. It was an accepted practice. It was a contemporary solution to an age old problem...the problem of childlessness. The sad thing is, of course, is that she took the action because she blamed God for failing to give her a child. You see the problem was the problem of patience...the problem of waiting for the promise to come true. There was no command of God to take this particular step...it was a pragmatic solution conceived in the quite desperation that came from having to wait a long time for the promise to come true.

Now verse four and following tells us Abraham went along with the idea and tells us of the immediate, unexpected consequences of their action.

^{NIV} **Genesis 16:4...He slept with Hagar, and she conceived. When she knew she was pregnant, she began to despise her mistress. ⁵ Then Sarai said to Abram, "You are responsible for the wrong I am suffering. I put my servant in your arms, and now that she knows she is pregnant, she despises me. May the LORD judge between you and me." ⁶ "Your servant is in your hands," Abram said. "Do with her whatever you think best."** Then Sarai mistreated Hagar; so she fled from her.

The fruit of righteous patience takes a long time to ripen...the fruit of impatient pragmatism can ripen overnight. And that certainly was the case with Abraham and Hagar. Apparently Hagar began almost immediately to flaunt her pregnancy in front of Sarah...and Sarah became indignant about it. But she

didn't resent Hagar near as much as she resented Abraham. Sarah's plan had been to make the child her own...Hagar's plan was different...she intended to keep the child as her own...and to keep close all of the blessings associated with the child. That seems to be the gist of what Sarah says to Abraham when she complains, **"This is your fault. I put my servant in your arms and now she despises me."** I think Sarah thought that Abraham told Hagar about the promised seed and perhaps hinted that she might be the mother of that seed if she bore him a son.

You see neither one of them cared anything for Hagar...to them Hagar was just so much plastic to be molded into their hopes and aspirations. It didn't matter that she was a real person...a real person who had hope and dreams and aspirations of her own...no, their plan was to use her and discard her.

You can see that in the fact that Abraham acquiesced to Sarah's complaint so quickly and told her that the Egyptian Hagar was her servant and that she could do whatever she wanted with her. And so she did. Sarah began to mistreat her immediately...to humiliate her. And here is one of those remarkably strange coincidences of Scripture. The verb that is used to describe Sarah's treatment of Hagar the Egyptian is the Hebrew word same verb used to describe the Egyptians treatment of the children of Israel during their captivity. You the seed of the treatment the Israelites were to receive later on seems to have been planted right here by Sarah herself. Anyway, Sarah began to abuse Hagar and so Hagar ran away from her mistress and stopped at a well along the road to Shur.

And then in verse seven, the Lord Himself spoke to Hagar and when He did He asked her the two most important questions that anyone can ever be asked. Look at verse seven.

^{NIV} **Genesis 16:7...**The angel of the LORD found Hagar near a spring in the desert; it was the spring that is beside the road to Shur. ⁸ And he said, "**Hagar, servant of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going?**" "**I'm running away from my mistress Sarai,**" she answered. ⁹ Then the angel of the LORD told her, "**Go back to your mistress and submit to her.**" ¹⁰ The angel added, "**I will so increase your descendants that they will be too numerous to count.**"

You see the promise of the Angel of the Lord...the promise of the preincarnate Christ Himself...was that the Lord Himself would bless Hagar's seed...causing their numbers to be so great that they too would be too numerous to count. But that did not mean that the seed born to Hagar and Abraham would be the seed of the promise...in fact, the Angel of the Lord went on to tell Hagar that her son would be the source of a great deal of conflict. Look at verse 11.

^{NIV} **Genesis 16:11...**The angel of the LORD also said to her: "**You are now with child and you will have a son. You shall name him Ishmael, for the LORD has heard of your misery.**" ¹² **He will be a wild donkey of a man; his hand will be against everyone and everyone's hand against him, and he will live in hostility toward all his brothers.**"

The Lord tells Hagar to name her son Ishmael...which is basically the same name as "**Samuel.**" You can see how the "**shmael**" part of his name corresponds to the word "**Samuel.**" And the point is that God heard her cry...hence the reason for the name. But then the Lord goes on to describe the character of the boy to be born to her...He says the boy will be a "**wild donkey of a man.**"

Now is the almost exactly the same thing my mother's doctor said to her when I was born.

No, actually we ought not to think of the modern idea of a "**donkey**" when we read this text. It is not an American donkey or burro that is being referred to at all. Rather, the animal being referred is the desert onager...a horse like creature that is wild, swift, proud and untamable. And the point is that the seed of Ishmael would be like that...and certainly that would have been bad enough but the prophecy regarding him and his descendants goes on..."**his hand will be against everyone and everyone's hand against him, and he will live in hostility toward all his brothers.**"

There Hebrew here is lovely...it says that he will live to the east of all his brothers...and the idea is figurative. He will live in their face...in their crawl and that will be true of...especially true of his relationship to Abraham's other seed...Isaac. You see the idea is that this pragmatic shortcut taken by Abraham and Sarah will become, in fact, an everlasting shortcut...a shortcut that will forever plague the peace of the region and the fulfillment of the promise.

Now the idea is that Ishmael became the father of the Arab nation and you know the Arabs around the world claim him as their father...actually they claim Abraham as their father...Abraham through Ishmael in the same way the Jews claim Abraham through Isaac.

You can see how this disastrous decision of Abraham and Sarah had disastrous consequences...consequences that extend all the way four thousand years into the present.

Now that does not mean that we ought to look down upon or slight Arabs in any way. In fact, I suspect that there are a lot more Arab Christians in the world than there are Jewish Christians...and even if there were only one...we would do well to remember that any wall of separation that ever existed has been broken down in Christ...and that fact is true of both Jews and Arabs. So the point that Moses is trying to get his readers to see is not that Arabs are to be thought of as the trouble but rather that it is important to realize that trying to pragmatically manipulate one's circumstances by treating others as if they are of no consequence will almost always have repercussions.

In the case of Abraham's descendants, you can see the conflict still breaking out in the Middle East. Anyway, God did not forget Hagar. He comforted her and she responded to His comfort...and the funny thing is that Abraham loved this boy...loved him tremendously. Later on when God promised Abraham that he was yet to have a son, Abraham thanked God but that was not the first thing he said. The first thing he said was...

NIV Genesis 17:18..."If only Ishmael might live under your blessing!"

You see Abraham loved the boy and that was part of the grief his sin caused him to bear. He knew that Ishmael would be blessed but that Ishmael's way would be the way of hardship...how that must have broke his ancient heart.

Now in verse 13, Hagar acknowledges the kindness of God and calls the place **"The God Who Sees Me."** You see there is world of difference between the **"God Who Sees"** and the **"God Who Sees Me."**

^{NIV} **Genesis 16:13**...She gave this name to the LORD who spoke to her: "**You are the God who sees me,**" for she said, "**I have now seen the One who sees me.**" ¹⁴ That is why the well was called Beer Lahai Roi; it is still there, between Kadesh and Bered. ¹⁵ So Hagar bore Abram a son, and Abram gave the name Ishmael to the son she had borne. ¹⁶ Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore him Ishmael.

Obviously after her meeting with the Angel of the Lord, Hagar returned and submitted herself to Sarah. She did so and she did so for a period of some thirteen years...until Isaac was born. At that time she was cast out again from Abraham's family at Sarah's insistence...and yet Ishmael went on to father a great nation...for he is the father of all of the Arab peoples....from Palestine to Saudia Arabia...and I am making the point because the conflict that these two great people groups know comes from this very scene...this very Bible story...and is testament...an everlasting testament, I think, to the sorrow caused by an everlasting shortcut...a pragmatic solution to a problem God had already promised to solve.

And yet the problem exists...and is the underlying issue behind almost every news item on television. It is the underlying tension that makes our world today such a dangerous place to live. And there is a solution to the problem...the solution is Jesus Christ...for it is only in Him that the wall of separation between these two great people groups can ever be done away. But that leaves us with another question. It leaves us with the questions, "**Then what is the message for us today?**"

I think there are two or three important applications that we ought to draw. First

and most simply, a long difficult obedience is better than a short, pragmatic disobedience. It is better to do the hard thing the right way...than to do the hard thing the easy way. That sometimes happens when we decide that we cannot wait any longer...that we cannot endure God's timing or God's methods any longer...that we know better than He does...that the moment is too ideal or too important to pass...even if the moment demands that we circumvent God's Word or His clear commands.

It is a truth I have often tried to convey to teens...about the importance of sexual purity...about the importance of keeping their bodies pure for their future mates. It is not that God wants or their parents want them to live prudish lives...it is rather that a simple moment of unrighteous sexual experimentation can seriously damage the sexual joy and freedom that comes from a clear conscience. And the same is true for adults. When men and women pursue emotional fulfillment in late night chat rooms or in people other than their spouses they are seeking the way of the everlasting shortcut.

It is the same truth when it comes to dealing with our conflicts with each other...God has ordained a proper pattern for how we are to treat each other...when we deviate from that pattern we are taking the path...the pragmatic path of the everlasting shortcut. Let us learn from Abraham and Sarah...let us learn from the sorrow their action has brought upon the world. At the same time, let us be grateful that the Lord Jesus knew only the long, hard path of obedience...especially in regard to the salvation that He has won for us.

In obtaining our great redemption He took no shortcuts...He was offered them by Satan in His temptation but He took the long, hard road of patient

obedience...He had them thrust upon Him by His own unbelieving disciples but He took the long, hard road of patient obedience and He did that for the joy set before Him...that is, for our great redemption.

Even in Gethsemane when He was confronted with the immediacy of the sorrow of the cross and asked the Father whether the cup of suffering might not pass Him by, He did so adding, **“Nevertheless, not my will but thine.”**

You see He wanted to obtain for us a salvation that was complete and full without any flaw...and He did so for us...let us seek to live before Him and to honor Him with the same determination and resolution...with the same kind of faithful, grateful obedience...let us lay aside once and for all...the way of the everlasting shortcut.

Let's pray.