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GOD'S WILL, MY WAY

Jeffery D. Woodhams

I know that the title of today's sermon might cause some confusion. There are some preachers, well-known preachers, that teach that when you tell God what you want, He is obligated to give it to you. If you claim something in the name of Jesus, it's yours, they say. If you came to hear a feel-good message about that, I'm sorry to disappoint. The passage we are going to explore today runs completely counter to this "name it-claim it" theology.

My former employer, Dr. Ron Cottle, has been known to say, "Ninety percent of the will of God is timing." While you won't find that particular quote in Scripture, I think you'll find it to be very scriptural. In fact, our passage today is a near-perfect illustration of the point.

Now, you remember that in Genesis 15, we found that God had made Abram a wonderful covenant. God had given Abram a vision and a promise. Abram comes out of that wonderful experience into his current, heartbreaking reality. Look at Genesis 16:1, if you would, please. Just the first part of that verse:

Now Sarai Abram's wife bare him no children:

Abram comes out of his wonderful, "mountain top" experience, into this harsh reality. He has a promise from God for an untold, uncountable number of descendants, but his wife is barren. Not only is she barren, but she's long past the age of child bearing. From the human perspective, this is a hopeless situation.

In comes human calculation (and don't tell me you've never done this!): if I know God's will, how do I go about bringing it to pass in this state of barrenness, of hopelessness? I know what God has said, but I don't see how it can come to pass, and I don't want to wait any longer. We then put God on our timetable and ask for His help in accomplishing our agenda. Let's see how Abram and Sarai carried this out in the rest of verse 1 and then verse 2:

and she had a handmaid, an Egyptian, whose name was Hagar.

And Sarai said unto Abram, Behold now, the LORD hath restrained me from bearing: I pray thee, go in unto my maid; it may be that I may obtain children by her. And Abram hearkened to the voice of Sarai.

This may sound like a far-fetched solution to us here in twenty-first century America, but archaeological finds affirm that this proposal was very much in keeping with the customs of the day. Beginning in 1925, archaeologists uncovered thousands of records known collectively as "the Nuzi tablets." The Nuzi tablets were written by a group known as the Hurrians, which are known as Hivites and Jebusites in the Bible. The social details recorded in these tablets laid to rest the liberal teaching that the patriarchs Abram, Isaac and Jacob were merely mythical figures. One of the many

corroborating details was the custom depicted in the Nuzi tablets that if a wife were unable to bear children, she would find another wife for her husband and have a surrogate child through the second wife. That child would become the legitimate heir. If by some chance the original wife did have a child subsequently, her child would become the primary heir, but the other child could never be disowned. Incidentally, this part of the Genesis record was almost universally discredited by so-called scholars in the years leading up to the discovery of the Nuzi tablets. Once again, archeology confirmed the truthfulness of Scripture and silenced the critics.

Just because it was legal and acceptable to man doesn't mean it was a good idea, though. And just because Sarai suggested it (as, indeed, the Nuzi tablets confirm it was her duty to do so) does not mean that she really wanted Abram to go through with it. When you read the rest of the story, you see that Sarai harbors some resentment toward Abram for following her idea. It makes me think that just maybe she was hoping he'd say *no* to the idea and affirm his love for her. Oh, Abram, Abram! You ought to have known that sometimes women seek affirmation through denial! Men, sometimes you're supposed to say, "No!": "Does this dress make me look fat?"; "Do you wish I looked like her?" All I can say is that if you answer *yes* to a question like that, you deserve whatever you get afterward!

But Abram sees barrenness in spite of God's promise. He justifies and rationalizes a course of action: "I'm supposed to have innumerable descendants. I know that God intends for me to have a child. I guess it's up to me to do my part to make it happen." Abram gives in to rationalization. The result is pure misery for everyone involved.

As we read the next few verses, I want you to see if you notice Abram asking God about this, okay? Let's read verses 3 and 4:

And Sarai Abram's wife took Hagar her maid the Egyptian, after Abram had dwelt ten years in the land of Canaan, and gave her to her husband Abram to be his wife.

And he went in unto Hagar, and she conceived: and when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress was despised in her eyes.

There—did you see how Abram talked to God about this? You didn't see it? Of course not. Abram had it all figured out. "This is God's will, and this is how I'm going to get what He's promised." Sarai presents Hagar to Abram; Abram goes through with the marriage; and sure enough, Hagar conceives.

But something happens that wasn't part of the plan. Hagar realizes that her child will inherit everything that belongs to Abram and Sarai. In other words, Hagar is no longer going to be a slave, but a lady of wealth and standing. She begins to mock and disrespect Sarai: "Just wait, old lady. You're going to die, and then all this will be mine. You can't disown me, and I'm not going to obey you any longer. I'm not just some slave girl now. I'm going to call the shots around here."

Sarai is miserable—absolutely miserable. All of the resentment that she felt toward Abram for actually going through with her suggestion begins to boil over. Her handmaiden taunts her, adding fuel to the fire. She finally is so "fed up" that she confronts Abram:

And Sarai said unto Abram, My wrong be upon thee: I have given my maid into thy bosom; and when she saw that she had conceived, I was despised in her eyes: the LORD judge between me

and thee.

But Abram said unto Sarai, Behold, thy maid is in thine hand; do to her as it pleaseth thee. And when Sarai dealt hardly with her, she fled from her face.

Sarai's true feelings come out. Surprise, surprise—she is angry! She is furious. That phrase, “The Lord judge between me and thee,” is significant in that she's invoking God's judgment on Abram for doing wrong. So now Sarai is angry, petulant, and casting all the blame on Abram.

Abram passes the buck: “This is your problem. You deal with it.” He doesn't want to get involved, even though this problem is tearing his family apart. He'd rather just distance himself from the situation. Friends, passivity is a terrible trait in fathers. The sad account of King David's children is a tragedy of passivity.

Abram tells Sarai, “You deal with it”; and deal with it she does! She's angry, and she pours out her wrath on Hagar. She is harsh to the point where Hagar is forced to run away.

Now let's consider this. Everyone involved could have said, “I was just trying to do God's will.” Everyone involved felt that the others were to blame when things went wrong. The result of doing God's will in our own way is strife, harshness, and rebellion.

Now folks, we have got to get our heads around this. Whenever we find strife, harshness, and rebellion in our midst, we are most assuredly carrying out God's will in our own way. We can look around at everyone else and cast blame. We can piously declare that we're the ones following God's will, and our opponents are bringing the strife; but the fact is that if we set about doing God's work in our own way, we're headed for trouble.

We're not the first ones to see this profound truth here, either: the apostle Paul refers to this very passage in Galatians 4 as means of teaching us spiritual truths. Hagar and her son represent the Law, while Sarah and her son represent grace. Hagar and her son represent those who try to please God through religious activity. “Well, I go to church. I teach Sunday school. I am on this committee and that committee. I'm an important person doing important things. I matter. And I am here to make sure the rest of you tow the line!” And so we set up the rituals, the artificial standards, the methods by which everyone else is supposed to please God. We're here to make sure that the church's standards and reputation are maintained. If that be our attitude, then we are spiritually Ishmael. We are working after the fashion of the flesh, trying to maintain the Law.

When we develop that kind of atmosphere, we are not willing to let the Holy Spirit work in people's lives. New Christians and new members are supposed to transform instantly into perfect clones of us. Christians who stray or fall into sin are gossiped about and criticized, but rarely properly admonished, exhorted, and restored to fellowship. We just shoot them and write them off as losses.

Please don't misunderstand me: I'm not saying that Christians have a license to sin. We don't. And we absolutely do have a duty to maintain our purity before Christ. Just keep in mind that we are to speak the truth in love, that we are to give our best assistance to those who are weaker in the faith, and that we are to give the Holy Spirit His rightful place.

Looking back at Paul's use of this story, how can we possibly see that Sarai represents grace? She wasn't very graceful to Hagar, that's for sure! The parallel is in the fact that the child born to Sarai was born according to God's will, in God's own way, according to God's own timing! The lesson of Isaac is primarily a lesson of being patient, waiting for God's timing, and walking with God in the meanwhile, rather than depending upon our own feeble flesh.

The main lessons for us today are these: first, if we find that we have strife and rebellion in our midst, then we are out of step with God's way. We may be following His will, but not His way. We can throw Scripture at our opponents and feel good about ourselves, but we are out of His way. Second, we can't find satisfaction in religious activity or in keeping the Law or in church rules. A fleshly approach to spirituality will only lead to problems. Finally, even though it's hard to wait and simply walk with God while He works out the details, that is exactly what we must do. We are to keep doing what we know to be right. We are to be faithful. We are to press on, even though we don't see the fulfillment right away. Trust God to bring the breakthrough when He's ready, not when we think we're ready.