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FAITH OR FLESH

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The Pilgrim's Progress by John Bunyan is an enduring classic and an all-time best seller. The book is an extended allegory in which different kinds of people and events are represented. The people's names are a reflection of a kind of attitude or personality. For example, two people that Pilgrim meets early in his travels are Obstinate and Pliable. Their names indicate their personalities and actions. He also meets someone named Evangelist; his job is no surprise to any of us. Of the dozens and dozens of characters mentioned in the book, one that stands out most in my mind is one named Talkative. Talkative loves to talk about God, about the Bible, about theology in general. He is described as the kind of person who looks more handsome at a distance than he does up close. What we discover about Talkative is that he's full of hot air—and little else. When we see him at home, among his family members, we find that he's abusive and quarrelsome. When he's among Christians, he talks about God; when he's at home, he lives a different sort of life.

What a picture for us! Talkative is a picture of living in the flesh. He has *knowledge of God*, but little or no *power of God*. He knows what God expects of him, but he's not willing to live in the power of the Spirit.

Abraham's life is a picture of the life of any man or woman of faith. The apostle Paul reveals to us that we see in Abraham a pattern of God working in the lives of His people. This is spelled out for us explicitly in Paul's teachings from Genesis chapter 21. In the book of Galatians, Paul looks back to Genesis 21 for a powerful life lesson about living in the flesh, or living by faith. We need to keep in mind that while some parts of this story may seem harsh, there are two lessons here: first, actions have consequences; and second, we have a picture of faith versus flesh.

With that in mind, let's look at Genesis 21:1-2:

- 1 *And the LORD visited Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did unto Sarah as he had spoken.*
- 2 *For Sarah conceived, and bare Abraham a son in his old age, at the set time of which God had spoken to him.*

Did you notice those little phrases in verse one, “as he had said” and “as he had spoken”? We see more of the same in verse two! The emphasis here is that God keeps His promises! The Word of the Lord is sure. God kept His promise, just as He said He would, in the time which He had set. Abraham and Sarah would have liked to have had the fulfillment years and years before, but God had His own timetable. That is why we must remember that ninety percent of the will of God is timing!¹

The next few verses talk about the child and the way the family received him. You may recall that when God had last visited Abraham and had repeated the promise that Abraham would have a son, and that Sarah would be a mother, Sarah had overheard and had laughed inwardly. She laughed at God's

1 Attributed to Dr. Ronald E. Cottle.

promise because in her way of thinking it was an impossible dream. She basically said in today's language, "There's no way!" But God called her out and told her that when the child was born, she was to name him *Isaac*, which means "laughter." It was partly a reminder of her lack of faith, but it was also a foretelling of the great joy the child would bring. Let's read now verses 3-7:

4 And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac being eight days old, as God had commanded him.

5 And Abraham was an hundred years old, when his son Isaac was born unto him.

6 And Sarah said, God hath made me to laugh, so that all that hear will laugh with me.

7 And she said, Who would have said unto Abraham, that Sarah should have given children suck? for I have born him a son in his old age.

8 And the child grew, and was weaned: and Abraham made a great feast the same day that Isaac was weaned.

Abraham circumcised baby Isaac just as God had instructed. In this way, the child is brought into the covenant God had made with Abraham, a covenant which was to be passed down through Abraham's promised child generation after generation. Keep in mind that, as the apostle Paul notes, Abraham's faith was the basis of his salvation, not the keeping of the covenant. Yet the covenant is a picture of God's work and a reminder of His promises.

Abraham is one hundred and Sarah is ninety when the child is born. The book of Hebrews says that even though Sarah's body was beyond the age of childbearing, she trusted in God's promise (Hebrews 11:11). When she was hiding in the tent, she had laughed at God's promise; but at some point after that, she believed, and God worked a miracle. He restored her vitality to the point where she could not only conceive but also carry the pregnancy to birth and then afterward nurse the child. The mocking laughter which had been based in a lie (that God could not do as He said) became a joyful laughter based in the truth—a joyful, spirited, infectious laughter! The truth really does make us free.

Unfortunately, not everyone was happy with this arrangement. There is yet more derisive laughter within the household.

9 And Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, which she had born unto Abraham, mocking.

Enter Ishmael. The whole household is having a party for little Isaac, who according to the custom of the times was perhaps two or three years old. I don't know why a teenager would mock a little child in this manner; perhaps Isaac was a little older than two or three and Ishmael considered him some kind of "momma's boy." What I do know is that there's one sure way to get a mother riled up: attack her baby! Mothers love and protect their babies. Have you ever noticed this tends to be especially true of the youngest in a family? In this case, though, she has just this one child, and she's waited all her life for a baby.

Even so, Sarah's next statements and actions seem extraordinarily harsh. As with so many other things in life, what we are about to witness is the fruit of a years-long process.

10 Wherefore she said unto Abraham, Cast out this bondwoman and her son: for the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son, even with Isaac.

11 *And the thing was very grievous in Abraham's sight because of his son.*

Sarah spews out terrible things about Hagar and Ishmael. It's harsh to call Hagar a "bondwoman" and Ishmael "the son of this bondwoman." Hagar had served the family for at least twenty years, and Ishmael was a teenager who had grown up within the household as part of the family. Is this the way we treat people we've known so long?

It's apparent that Abraham loved Ishmael; he had even asked God to fulfill the promises made to Abraham through Ishmael. But there are a couple of factors at work here: first, Sarah had apparently never accepted either Hagar or Ishmael, even though Sarah was the one who insisted Abraham marry Hagar. Sarah harbors a grudge. Second, Ishmael was the product of Abraham and Sarah trying to do God's work in the strength of their flesh. That which is done in the flesh cannot be made into a work of faith.

This is the point of the whole story: *the flesh cannot please God*. That's the bottom line. We can't do things in the strength of our flesh in an effort to please God.

Paul takes up the story in Galatians 4:22-31. I'd like to tell the rest of this story from that passage if you don't mind. The rest of the story is that *Ishmael must go!*

22 *For it is written, that Abraham had two sons, the one by a bondmaid, the other by a freewoman.*

23 *But he who was of the bondwoman was born after the flesh; but he of the freewoman was by promise.*

24 *Which things are an allegory: for these are the two covenants; the one from the mount Sinai, which gendereth to bondage, which is Agar.*

25 *For this Agar is mount Sinai in Arabia, and answereth to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children.*

26 *But Jerusalem which is above is free, which is the mother of us all.*

27 *For it is written, Rejoice, thou barren that bearest not; break forth and cry, thou that travailest not: for the desolate hath many more children than she which hath an husband.*

28 *Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are the children of promise.*

29 *But as then he that was born after the flesh persecuted him that was born after the Spirit, even so it is now.*

30 *Nevertheless what saith the scripture? Cast out the bondwoman and her son: for the son of the bondwoman shall not be heir with the son of the freewoman.*

31 *So then, brethren, we are not children of the bondwoman, but of the free.*

Ishmael then is a picture of the bondage of the flesh to the law. In the flesh, we feel we must *do* certain things in order to appease the law and earn favor with God. We feel it's up to *us* to bring about a victory for God. However, what God wants us to do is to patiently wait for Him and move with Him. Our prayers should be less about getting God to move and more about getting our hearts to move in tune with His will and His timing.

Shall we make some examples? Let's say that someone opens a liquor store down the street. Shall we break the law and burn it down? We could justify the action by thinking of all the people we've rescued from the control of alcohol, but is that really God's method? Yet I've heard people suggest just such a thing. Or how about these blasphemous signs being posted by atheists around the country? Shall we send death threats to the sign owners or city council members? Of course not! But it is commonly reported that such threats are issued. Friends, that is the work of the flesh! In other words, Shall we prevent ungodly action with ungodly action of our own?²

Those things may seem far-fetched for us, so let's bring this a little closer by examining ways we may try to promote growth. You know, we could grow this church in numbers if we adopted the world's methods. We could get a lot of people in here with rock concerts. We could attract all kinds of people if we, as some churches now do, host a Bible study in a bar. We could turn our fellowship hall into a dance club. These are proven ways to grow a church numerically, but at what price? If we sow to the flesh, we will reap of the flesh corruption (Gal. 6:8).

Having said that, I have no problem with opening this church up for community events. Some churches host Super Bowl parties and the like; I've got no problem with that. But what I am saying is that if we build this church as a worldly enterprise, we'll have a worldly enterprise.

I want to make a point here about a group living in the flesh but claiming to be doing God's work: the Westboro Baptist Church. You have heard of this group picketing soldier's funerals, claiming that God hates people, America is doomed, and praising God for dead soldiers. It's repulsive. They made headlines this week because they had planned to picket the funeral of a little girl slain in a shooting spree last weekend. How wicked to do such things and claim to be speaking for God! Yet they do, and no amount of reasoning will change them. It's a mystery to us why anyone would do such terrible things until we understand the theology of that little church. They're Calvinists. As Calvinists, they've determined that they know that God loves some people and hates others. They then take the next logical step and claim to know whom God loves and whom He hates. Most Calvinists would never get to that point; but these have, and they live after the flesh, working in the power of their flesh, claiming to be following God's command. How arrogant! Can the same Spirit of God who commands us in the written Word to "go out into the highways and byways and compel them to come in" speak the exact opposite through a believer? Can the same Spirit who invites us so tenderly in Scripture turn us away through hateful speech in the mouths of God's children? No! "*Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy, and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price*" (Is. 55:1).

That's a rather extreme representation of what living for God in the strength of our flesh will do. However, the spiritual principal applies to us as well: if we live after the flesh, we also will be displeasing to the God we claim to serve. If we live after the Spirit, we can build with God something beautiful that will last for eternity. I want to finish with a few more verses from Galatians 6:

7 Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.

8 For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting.

9 And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not.

2 Rhetorical device. The answer is, of course, a resounding *no!*