

Trouble Ahead?

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[0 : 00] So this evening we want to turn back to Genesis chapter 16. There's a very famous song, an Irving Berlin song that was made famous by Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, and I think also by Nat King Cole and Frank Sinatra.

And laterally, for those of you who are younger, by Allied Dunbar in an advert that I think was in the 90s or so. And you know the chorus of this song, there may be trouble, I'm not going to sing it, you'll be glad to know, there may be trouble ahead, but while there's moonlight and music and love and romance, let's face the music and dance.

Now it's lovely sentiments and very romantic, I'm sure, but really is that all we have.

Because I don't think for many of us life is like that. It does seem certainly that there's not only trouble ahead, but there's trouble in the present for many of us.

It always is to a greater or lesser degree, and of course within troubling and difficult and insecure and for many people very frightening days.

[1 : 26] Remember Bob Dylan in 1981 brought out a great album called Shot of Love, and they had a song on that called Trouble. And the chorus was trouble, trouble, trouble, nothing but trouble.

And in many ways I think he was echoing the words that Job spoke in Job chapter 14 in verse 1 where he said, Man, whose born of woman is a few days and full of trouble.

And I think the great reality of the Bible is, or the great truth of the Bible is it doesn't ignore reality. It faces the troubles and difficulties and the sufferings head on.

And sometimes I think people think that makes the Bible depressing reading, and sometimes it is. But the great thing is that it doesn't leave trouble there.

It leads us to the gospel dance and to the celebration of grace. And we must always remember that, and must always remember that where we are just now is not the end of the story or the picture.

[2 : 39] And I think that comes across very much in this account of Hagar and Sarah and Abram. And I just want to try and keep things sharp this evening and make two simple comparisons here and apply it along the way to our own lives as believers.

And the first is very simple, well, they're both very simple. The first is that we mess up as believers. We mess up as believers. Now, as I unpack that through this story, I'm going to take a little aside here by just mentioning that we can mess up as believers by ignoring the hard bits of the Bible.

So maybe you've read this story tonight and you think, this is just a weird story. And it's so different from 21st century living. I don't get it.

I don't understand it. It's just so odd. And so you think, it's got nothing to say to me in my life today. And I think when we do that as Christians by ignoring the hard bits in the Bible, we're messing up and we're doing a great disservice to God because it's important that we do recognize that we require to work sometimes with Scripture and to dig with Scripture and to understand that God was speaking into history and into societies and into cultures and into times and generations, very different from ours.

And it's our task and our privilege as well to understand these times so that we can understand what God is saying into them and therefore to us.

[4 : 24] We don't want to be like the Brits abroad, you know, where everything must be in our language and we must be able to get a full English breakfast whenever we go out to eat or whatever it is.

And we don't expect to understand and recognize the culture into which we have gone. Now this is an ancient culture, ancient Near East.

It was an honor and a shame culture, and God is working with people in and through that culture. And in the time of that this was happening and written, childlessness was a huge issue for families.

I don't know, it still is a huge issue, but I think sometimes for different reasons, and in an honor and shame culture it was hugely significant that there were heirs and that there were children to carry the family name forward.

Now the law of that time, not God's law, but the law of that time and the culture of that time allowed for slave surrogacy.

[5 : 42] And that's what we have here. We have, you know, the strange story of Abram and Sarah having this promise from God that one of their own children would be their descendant and would be their heir and many children would come from that.

And as they were growing older, they didn't see that happening. And so Sarah gives Abram her slave Hagar to be the surrogate mother of his child.

And that was something that was allowed in that culture and that the society was very different from our society.

And we must recall that that is not God's original pattern for families and for marriage, but nonetheless the Bible records what people were doing, not necessarily saying it was what God wanted them to do.

So the times and the culture that this is written into is very different, this shame and honor culture where surrogacy like that was allowed. And we do need to think just a little bit about whether if Abram or Sarah or Hagar traveled to 21st century Scotland, what would they think?

[6 : 59] What would they think of our sophisticated and advanced society? I wonder if they would think we were completely crazy and brutal if they found out that, for example, 13,500 unborn children were aborted in Scotland in 2018.

Which country they would ask is civilized and respects life and respects love and respects men and women. So we recognize cultures are very different.

And if we ignore the hard bits, I think we're messing up as Christians and we're doing a disservice to God. So I think as we go into this story, we see that we can mess up as believers by taking things into our own hands as well.

That's what we see in the early part of the story, isn't it? That God has made this great promise. And Abram and Sarah can't work out how this promise is going to be fulfilled because Sarah can't get pregnant and she isn't having a child and she's getting old.

And so they take, as we've seen, they've taken matters into their own hand. But at no time in these early verses of chapter 16 do we see them consulting with God over it.

[8 : 24] Rather, they presume that they know what God has already decided and what is his mind because of the circumstances they find themselves in. And Sarah says, you know, behold, now the Lord has prevented me from bearing children go to my servant.

There is a degree of impatience. There's a degree of presumption that they know what God has already decided. There's a lack of trust.

They're not acting in faith. And interestingly, in the whole account between Abram and Sarah, it's very similar language to the language that's used with the account of Adam and Eve in that Sarah gives the servant girl to Abram and Abram agrees to that in the same way as what happened in the story with Adam and Eve, giving of the fruit and Adam receiving it.

And in all of this, what they were doing may have been done with the very best of intentions. They may have wanted to see God's promises fulfilled, but they couldn't wait on God and they couldn't wait for God to reveal how it would happen without them taking circumstances and taking the whole situation into their own hands.

Now we look at our own lives and we look at our circumstances and sometimes we think, we assume or we presume what God must be doing and what God is thinking.

[10 : 00] And maybe we sometimes imbibe the philosophy that God helps those who help themselves. It's not a biblical one. And we can be impatient. So we take matters into our own hands and we don't pray about seeking God's will and waiting on the Lord and waiting to see Him reveal His purposes for us.

We can take His promises and not wait for Him to fulfill them. And especially if we consider doing something that may be culturally or legally fine for us to do, we just go ahead and do it.

You know, an obvious application, maybe it would be in longing for an intimate relationship with someone in marriage that we don't wait on God for making the right choice.

We make a rash choice of partner, someone that's unsuitable or someone that is not a Christian or not sympathetic to our faith and or maybe it's someone with whom we become sexually active before making any lifelong commitment to them in marriage.

So it may be something like that or it may be a host of many different issues where we take matters into our own hands. We don't wait. We don't act in faith. We don't listen for His voice.

[11 : 23] And sometimes with the very best intentions, but disobedient to what God reveals in His word as His model and His will and His desire for us.

And so we learn of the great danger of taking matters into our hands. We mess up. And I think sometimes when that happens, our decisions have serious and can have serious consequences.

We see that here in the account with Abram and Sarah. Abram is willing to go along with this invitation from his wife and he takes Hagar to be his second wife and she conceives and gives birth to Ishmael.

And his willingness to do that and Sarah's desperation to be respected and honored with an heir leads to great trouble.

A break in the uniqueness and the intimacy and the sanctity of their marriage. And we see very quickly aspects of their marriage unraveling.

[12 : 35] Very soon there's jealousy between Sarah and Hagar. There's Hagar's own quickly disrespectful attitude towards Sarah.

There's Abram shrinking from his responsibility when there's tension between the two women and he just says, well, you know, you do what you think is right. There's ongoing tension as Ishmael grows up, as we see in later chapters.

And that affects Abram and Sarah because Abram has a great love for Ishmael, his son from Hagar. And Sarah finds that difficult to cope with.

And it leads to, in many ways, to generations of troubles. We see that there. We associate with David and Bathsheba and we see lots of ways in which decisions have serious consequences.

Yes, there's forgiveness and there's always forgiveness, but it doesn't preclude the consequences of our actions. And there's a great warning in this story for us as believers that there are consequences in this life for our choices.

[13 : 49] For the decisions we make, if we make them without reference to God, if we take matters into our own hands without seeking His will and without waiting on Him.

And maybe more so than anything in relational decisions we make, decisions we make about who we spend time with and who we end up marrying in our lives.

And that is because such decisions involve somebody else and involve somebody else intimately.

But any rash decision we take without reference to God, we know can be forgiven and we know will be forgiven, but with that restoration goes a cost.

So our decisions may have serious consequences. And I think at this point it's important if you're listening this evening that you're not a Christian, you're just maybe dipping your toe in the water.

[14 : 50] If you wouldn't call yourself yet a believer, it's important, I think, that you know that believers mess up, that the Bible is absolutely clear about that.

You know, I hate when media and the films present Christians, either as kind of super clean cut, awfully nice and good prudes who are highly puritanical, or the other extreme raging hypocrites for whom their relationship with God seems to be just a public show, and the rest of the time they're just living a life that is not in accordance with God's will at all.

But the truth is for nearly every believer, somewhat in the middle, that genuine Christians will mess up because they are sinners saved by grace, and God is doing a transforming work in their lives.

A genuine Christians will be honest about their hearts and about their needs and about their weaknesses. There shouldn't be any self-righteousness in our lives, but nonetheless, we mess up.

Now, that doesn't excuse people not believing. They're not saying, well, if you're a Christian, you shouldn't be messing up in your life, and I don't want anything to do with that, because there's a genuine recognition of the need for God on a daily basis, and they've recognized their need for Christ.

[16 : 23] And if you haven't done that, then maybe it's your head that's in the sand. What can I say to believers at this point that we must see that truth of believers messing up in this story here as a warning, not as an excuse.

We can't take another well-known verse in society and in the world around us, which says, too air is human, which is, of course, correct, and to love is divine is also correct.

But to air is human is not to be used as an excuse or as a reason not to change in our lives because in Christ we are empowered to be different.

We will fail, but we are to be dependent. We don't want to fail. Our motive is to be obedient and to be loving and learning and having a changed heart that desires to do God's will.

We want to seek patience to wait on Him and to follow Him and to obey Him. And we will always have that motive and seek to have that motive of not just sinning and doing wrong things so that grace may abound.

[17 : 46] We know that Paul speaks about that, speaks against that in the New Testament. Can you imagine a marriage where one partner is constantly unfaithful and continues to be unfaithful in that marriage because every time he comes back he's forgiven and accepted or she's forgiven and accepted?

But that doesn't make for a healthy marriage. It makes for one that's enslaved and one where there's enabling wrong behavior that lacks respect and lacks love and lacks a good motive of passion and concern for your partner.

So we need to recognize that the folly that is exposed in Scripture among those who believe is never an excuse for us to be careless about our own Christian life.

So we see in this story that believers do mess up, but the second thing I want to say is that God doesn't mess up. And if that's the only thing you remember from this sermon this evening, I hope that you'll take it away with you.

God doesn't mess up. He's intimately involved in this story and he works through the carnage in many ways of what is happening here.

[19 : 13] We see that he is the one who doesn't let go. He's made a covenant, this amazing covenant with Abram in the previous chapter that Thomas explained so well, so beautifully last week, that God was so committed to redeeming his people and Abram and his family and his descendants taking his right up to the work of Jesus and the cross and all of the spiritual descendants of Abram, including ourselves, who are Christians.

He ultimately, he doesn't let go because he takes the consequences of making that commitment that he made in covenant, fulfilling it as we saw on the cross, where he takes our sin and he pays the price for that and is committed to returning again to bring us into the new heavens and new earth.

And through that, his love will not give up on us. And his love did not give up on Abram at this point, though Abram and Sarah were untrusting and just went ahead on their own steam.

We see that through this and the other events in Abram's life that God is working with him, forgiving him, training, teaching, drawing him to a place of deeper and deeper trust, right up to the penultimate act in many ways of this recorded of Abram's life, of great trust when he is willing to take that child who eventually is born to him and Sarah, the child Isaac, and he is asked to sacrifice him.

And he entrusts that command to God, believing that God would provide a lamb or would raise his son back to life.

[21 : 13] So there's a maturing and a deepening and a commitment to Abram and he's not letting go. And I wonder if you or if I need to be reminded of that this evening.

You know, there's a great verse in Philippians which says, Philippians 1, 6, I am sure of this that he who has begun a good work in you will bring it to completion on the day of Jesus Christ.

Maybe this evening you need to be reminded of that. Maybe you're watching this evening as someone who made a profession of faith in Jesus Christ, but you've drifted away from him.

You've maybe lost your first love. You assumed that God isn't interested, doesn't care, isn't true to His word, has moved on. Can I ask you to consider renewing your trust in him?

Don't run away from him, because if he wasn't committed to you, if he wasn't committed never to letting go of you, he would never have gone beyond Gethsemane.

[22 : 13] He would never have made it to the cross. There's no deeper evidence of his commitment to not let go of all of those who have come to him by faith than his work in the cross.

So please heed his loving warning and trust in him. Trust, especially when every atom of your being up till this point is maybe saying otherwise.

And if you're in trouble or if you feel there are troubled days ahead, know that he will not let go even when we don't see and don't understand, and even when we're in the dark, he holds us and the dark for him is his light.

So God doesn't mess up, he doesn't let go. He also is the God who hears our cries. And we see that very much in this, the great story with Hagar here.

She is an Egyptian slave to Abraham and Sarah. She would have been generally devalued and insignificant in that society.

[23 : 18] And she then takes on the surrogate roller. I don't suppose she had much choice in it to be perfectly honest. And as she finds out she's pregnant, she becomes disdainful of her mistress, Sarah.

And that leads to great tension so much so that Sarah wants her thrown out. And Abraham acquiesces to that particular request. Now when she's thrown out of her employment and her work in that home, she was kind of like a servant there.

There was no furlough, there was no jobseekers allowance. She was thrown out pregnant and desitued. A slave who had no prospects whatsoever except death.

And the angel of the Lord appears to her. God appears personally to her. The angel of the Lord here being synonymous with a revelation of God in the Old Testament.

God appears to Hagar who has cried out in desperation to the God of Abraham and Sarah.

[24 : 34] It's a seminal moment in world history. And he makes promises to her and he tells her to call the son that she's going to have, a wish meal which means that God hears, God hears her cries.

She goes on to praise God that she has seen God and she renames him. In verse 13, the God, you are a God of seeing.

She calls the name of the Lord who spoke to her, you are the God of seeing. For she said, truly I have seen him who looks after me. And she knows.

She's a nobody but she knows in the most remarkable way that God has personally come into her experience and she has had an audience with God, one of the few in the history of mankind.

And God promises her the child and promises that she will have descendants but also asks her to go back and fulfill her responsibilities to Abraham and Sarah.

[25 : 47] She can't run from this situation. Now we don't know about the dynamics of what happened and her going back and probably was quite awkward and difficult but nonetheless she obeys and does so.

He hears her cries. That is the God who doesn't mess up and that is our God. And there may be, as you listen this evening, a sense of feeling worthless that nobody really takes any interest in you or that God even doesn't.

And yet this is a great picture of the living God who sees and who knows and who hears her cries. In the bleakest and darkest and most depressing situations we can find ourselves in, anyone who cries out to him, he sees and he will save as we come to him and seek for his salvation.

It's intensely personal. God isn't a God who saves mankind. He saves individuals. And it's not good enough really for us just to have a general Savior who's not really very interested or very personal.

The whole reality of the gospel message is that we have this intensely impersonal relationship with God who we feel is in our presence, who sees us, who we see by faith and who hears our cries.

[27 : 20] And again this evening maybe you might be in a position where you feel very far from God, cry out to him and maybe even hear him say, don't run away.

Go back to the responsibilities you need to face up to. Say sorry in a situation if you need to do that, be reconciled with others but know that I am with you and know the way of healing and hope.

So he hears our cries and the last thing I want to mention here is that he also reveals a bigger truth in this story. It's not only intensely personal but there's a broadening out of God's involvement to reveal that he has a wider purpose and a plan and a bigger truth being unfolded because we have the disturbing prophecy that he gives to Hagar about her son Ishmael and his descendants.

Yeah, he has many descendants but he says, you know there in verse 11, hold your pregnant and you shall bear a son, you shall name Ishmael because the Lord is listening to your reflection. He should be a wild donkey of a man, his hand against everyone and everyone's hand against him and he shall dwell over against all as kinsmen and there's this reality that there's as a result of all that has happened and that has taken place and will take place, there will be an ongoing tension and ongoing hostility and division within the family and within therefore as it grows the nations.

And we see that from early on in chapter 21 when Isaac is weaned and there's a great celebration when Isaac is born to Sarah and Abram and he's weaned, it's a great celebration but Ishmael makes a fool of him and mocks him.

[29 : 10] Ishmael by this stage was probably 16 or 15 or 16 years old and again Hagar and Ishmael are thrown out and as history develops we see two very different lines developing through Abram seed and Hagar seed basically Jews and Arabs and we see even to this day huge tensions between these two races nations in all its complexity.

But what we see in this is also it reflects a spiritual reality. Galatians 4 speaks about that very much. It reminds us of humanity as a whole in a sense is that we have one Father, there is one God, one Father in heaven but ultimately the descendants of God who made us take two very different paths.

There are those who are children, spiritual children of God who come to faith in him through Jesus Christ, the inheritance, Abraham's covenant inheritance and there's those who are not.

That's the only two realities in the world and God says choose, you know, choose this day whom you will serve and we recognize that this physical picture bears a deeper spiritual reality and we see that spiritual reality transcending the two physical journeys that are taken by the sons of Abram because we know that Abram's physical seed, the Jewish people, they rejected the Savior and many Gentiles and many Arabs have become part of the spiritual family of God.

In fact, Abram's, the promise given to Abram and to Isaac and to his descendants was that all nations of the world will be blessed through the seed that would come.

[31 : 28] That is the Lord Jesus Christ. And so the invitation goes out to all. It transcends national barriers and backgrounds and races and nationalities but it's still either those who follow Christ or those who don't.

Every single human being belongs to one of these two sections of humanity and the invitation goes out to all.

So we remember that and we remember that our Muslim friends are distant cousins who need Jesus Christ just as much as we do. So I finish just with that truth that comes through this passage and it comes through the covenant unveiled and comes through all of God's word, is that He is the God who doesn't mess up and He's the God of the impossible.

You know, just like Abram and Sarah, we're prone to look at our life and even our life of faith in purely and simply rationalistic terms in our circumstances and if things aren't going according to plan then we just go ahead and make our own decisions.

We help ourselves in life with a peppering of faith along the way. But all through the Bible we're asked to trust in the God, the God who is the God of the impossible.

[32 : 54] And even the fact that He allows Sarah to have child way beyond childbearing age is a testament to that.

And the promise is that He impossibly takes judgment for our sin on Himself, divine judgment for our sin, divine wrath He takes on His own self, the impossible reality of salvation.

And His promise is to always help us, to always be there to answer our prayers and to enable us to live the Christian life, which is impossible by faith because He is raised from the dead and He's empowered us to live in that new resurrection power, in that new life and with that great hope.

So the encouragement is to trust and obey this God of the impossible and recognize that that is His stock and trade and give Him the glory for so doing.

Luke 18 verse 27, Jesus says, What is impossible with men is possible with God. I mean, you take that away as you think of maybe the impossibilities you're facing this coming week, fears, doubts, struggles, battles.

[34 : 20] How can I possibly carry on as a Christian? May you cry out as they guarded to the living God for salvation and may none of us do what Abram and Sarah did, which was to take things into their own hands.

Amen. Let's pray. Father God, help us, we pray, to not take matters into our own hands without reference to you, without knowing your will.

And if we don't know your will, not disobeying what we do know or not acting precipitously or presumptuously quickly without waiting to be guided by you.

Help us to live out the impossible life of faith as we cry out to you for your strength and know that you take us day by day and you love us, you're committed to us so much so that you went from that garden in Gethsemane and you allowed these nails to be thrust through your hands and your feet because of your great love and commitment to us and your resurrection proves that great life and that great promise for each of us this evening.

Amen.