



Four Stupid Things Believers Do to Mess Up Their Lives

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Genesis 16 "When people think they are desperate, it's amazing what they are willing to do. A wife who has been faithful to God and to her husband for years, frantic for his attention that is lacking because he is not loving her as God says he should, aware of her aging body and fading physical attraction, throws discretion to the wind and has an affair. A Christian man, tired of his unsuccessful search for a believing mate, finally gives in and marries either a non-Christian or a woman with dubious "faith" that really isn't faith at all. A Christian teenager, exasperated by the apparent inconsistencies in his parents, rebels, starts taking drugs and sleeping around. The world around us considers these things acceptable ways of coping."

Introduction

- Jay Leno, host of The Tonight Show, did a "man-on-the-street" type interview in which he asked some young people questions about the Bible. "Can you name one of the Ten Commandments?" he asked two college-age women. One replied, "Freedom of speech?" Mr. Leno said to the other, "Complete this sentence: Let him who is without sin..." Her response was, "have a good time?" Jay Leno then turned to a young man and asked, "Who, according to the Bible, was eaten by a whale?" The confident answer was, "Pinocchio." (1)
- Is it any wonder morality is in trouble? Yet I wonder how many of those who sit in church buildings this morning could answer such questions. Even more seriously, even if they could answer the questions, I wonder how many understand the significance of bible's teaching in our modern world and how it applies to them.
- I must confess to you that on this latter consideration, I'm not too optimistic. I see a lot of Christian people whose behavior is no different than those who don't know God. I see them making the same poor choices again and again and messing up their lives and the lives of those around them, sometimes to points beyond repair. We're told that the divorce rate is the same in the church as it is in the world. Many believers' behavior and morals on Monday through Saturday are really no different than those of their non-Christian neighbors.
- We're going to go to the word of God today and learn from it. For learning to take place we must have a preacher to preach and people to listen and take it to heart. I'll work hard to do my part. I hope you will, too.
- I've called my message, "Four Stupid Things Believers Do to Mess Up Their Lives." It's based on a portion of the life of Abraham and is part of our continuing study of his life. I hope that once you see these four things, you will agree with me that they are indeed stupid. Even better, I hope you will make up your mind to remember and avoid each of them in your life.
- Our lesson today comes from Genesis 16. We'll begin in verse 1.
(Read v. 1a)
- Amid the things I am going to say in this message, I want you to know that I understand that the various problems of the human race can be grievous in both their nature and effects. May nothing I say here take away from the truth that emotional pain is very real. Childlessness, an unhappy marriage, loss of a loved one, disappointment in the children we have raised, and many similar issues, tax us seemingly to the limits of our emotional stability. Sarai's inability to conceive children was a very real pain that she had lived with for a long time. As we enter this part of the account, she is 75 years old. All human hope of conception is gone.
- Having said that, I also want you to know that some of the schemes we cook up as desperate remedies for these problems can be even worse than the problems themselves. You're about to see that illustrated here in what I'm calling the first stupid thing believers do to mess up their lives.

1. They Let Fleshly Desire Overrule Good Sense.

(Read v. 1b-2b)

- What Sarai proposed was that Abram take a second wife - in this case, a younger slave woman - and have a

child through her. That may sound strange to us, but in their day, it was accepted in the culture of Canaan for a barren woman to have children through what we might call today a surrogate. Of course they had none of the technology we have to make such an act impersonal. The woman would actually have to become Abram's wife. That is made clear in verse 3: "And... Abram's wife Sarai took Hagar the Egyptian, her maid, and gave her to her husband Abram as his wife." Polygamy, which was clearly not the intended teaching of Genesis 2:24, was accepted and practiced among the nations of Canaan. The things Abram and Sarai were plotting here would not raise a single eyebrow among those in their time and in their part of the world. Yet Abram and Sarai were abandoning their faith in God's promise, which had only recently been reaffirmed to Abram in chapter 15 by a covenant. They were resorting, as Paul made clear in Galatians 4:23, to the flesh rather than faith. Any time we give up on a promise of God and resort to our own means, we are doing exactly what they did - we are letting fleshly desire overrule good sense.

- When people think they are desperate, it's amazing what they are willing to do. A wife who has been faithful to God and to her husband for years, frantic for his attention that is lacking because he is not loving her as God says he should, aware of her aging body and fading physical attraction, throws discretion to the wind and has an affair. A Christian man, tired of his unsuccessful search for a believing mate, finally gives in and marries either a non-Christian or a woman with dubious "faith" that really isn't faith at all. A Christian teenager, exasperated by the apparent inconsistencies in his parents, rebels, starts taking drugs and sleeping around.
- The world around us considers these things acceptable ways of coping. After all, we deserve to be happy, right? It seems that there is always a ready cheering section of "friends" at the office or at school who chant, "That's right. Just do it. You have it coming. You deserve to be happy." It sounds so true, so convincing, when you feel desperate. Those people down at the church, trying to remind you of your commitment to Christ, seem so backward, so out-of-touch. Yet there is a big problem. No one sets aside the word of God without consequence. And may I quickly add, not even that cheering section at the office or at school. They may seem to get by with scuttling God's principles, but it will catch up to them.
- "Do not be deceived," wrote Paul in Galatians 6:6. "God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh shall from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit shall from the Spirit reap eternal life."
- In our desperation, we may say to ourselves, "Surely God will understand my frustration and not hold me accountable." Or perhaps we say, "Well, I don't care what God thinks. I'm going to do it anyway." Or we say, "I don't care if I go to hell. It's hell to live in this condition anyway." (Before giving in to this last line, go back and read the Bible's description of hell. I'm sure people in that awful place would gladly trade places with us on our worst day!) No matter how we do it, if we kick over God's principles, it will come back and bite us.
- Abram and Sarai, so faithful in their lives to this point, are now scheming according to the flesh and not according to faith in what will end up a disaster in their lives and in the lives of those who would come after them.
- That brings us to the second stupid thing believers do to mess up their lives.

2. They Listen to Those Who Are Unfamiliar with the Word of God.

(Read v. 2c-4a)

- OK. They did it. The deed was done. At last the child they had wanted for so long was on the way. Their house would soon be filled with the sound of a happy child playing. What joy it would bring to them! What could possibly be wrong with that? Didn't they deserve to be happy?
- Their euphoria was short-lived. The troubles started even before the child saw the light of day. The tension that resulted in their house from that day onward was so thick you could cut with a knife. What was intended to produce happiness would end up producing nearly endless sorrow in areas they had never expected.
- But I'm getting ahead here. My point is that one of the four stupid things believers do to mess up their lives is that they heed those who are unfamiliar with the will of God. We see it in our text.
- "And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai."
- "So what's so wrong with a man listening to his wife?" Nothing, unless his wife doesn't understand the will of God.
- God had appeared to Abram, not Sarai, when they left Ur. He had appeared to Abram again, and not Sarai, when they left Haran. In fact, on each occasion that God appeared, including the most recent one in chapter 15 when He made the land covenant and promised a child from Abram's own body, the revelation was made solely to Abram. So who knows the will of God clearly and who doesn't? Abram knows. Sarai knows far less.

Spiritual people need spiritual advice. When we seek help in making decisions, we need to seek out mature believers who know God's word firsthand.

- Yet today it is far more common, especially when people are desperately contemplating stepping outside of God's will, to seek advice from either weak believers or those who don't know God's word at all.
- It's almost a proverb that people in this condition seek advice from those who will tell them what they want to hear, not what they need to hear. The surest way to make an enemy if you love the things of God is to step in and tell such a person what the Bible says. Paul was aware of this among the Galatians when he detected their apparent iciness toward him in Galatians 4 after they had so warmly received him in the past. There he wrote, "[Before] you received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus Himself. Where then is that sense of blessing you had?... Have I therefore become your enemy by telling you the truth?" (2)
- From the non-Christian counselor to the non-Christian "best friend," the advice that is usually sought by such a one contemplating stepping out of God's will is not what comes from Scripture but what comes from the popular culture. Yet the Bible says in Psalm 1:1, "How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked."
- I blame Abram for what happened here just as much as Sarai. In fact, it appears to me that he shirked his responsibility big time when he didn't simply refuse what she suggested and remind her of what God had promised. We'll talk more about his part in this in just a bit.
- We come now to the third stupid thing believers do to mess up their lives.

3. They Blame Others For Things They Bring Upon Themselves.

- Surely when the troubles started on account of these things, Abram and Sarai recognized their fault and owned up to all this, right? Wrong!

(Read v. 4b)

- That word "despised" in the original language carried the connotation of taking something lightly or trifling. It sometimes meant to belittle. Suddenly, in Hagar's eyes, her mistress Sarai, is no longer respected with the same weight of honor as before. And why should that be surprising? Hagar is suddenly elevated from the position of slave to second wife, but in two things she now considers herself even better than the first wife - she is younger and she can conceive children. Perhaps she believes she has supplanted Sarai in Abram's heart.
- From Sarai's vantage, that wasn't the way this was supposed to work out! Of course when we resort to trusting schemes of the flesh rather than the promises of God, it never turns out like we expected.
- So Sarai was humbled by her attempt to make things happen and she went to Abram and apologized for her ill-fated suggestion, right? Wrong. She blamed Abram!

(Read v. 5)

- She's blaming him! This third stupid thing that believers do to mess up their lives is also a very common occurrence. Even when the chickens begin coming home to roost, the perpetrator is not accepting responsibility.
- A sure sign of spiritual immaturity is blaming others when we ourselves are to blame. Jesus said something about that in Matthew 7:5. He said, "You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye."
- So what does it mean when people refuse to accept responsibility for their own mistakes? It means they are destined to repeat them. Such people never learn. They stagger their way through life from one crisis to the next, battered, bruised, taken advantage of, and it never occurs to them that they hold the key to changing things because they are too proud to admit they're wrong. The wife blames the husband, as Sarai did here. The husband blames the wife, as Adam did in the garden when he said in Genesis 3:12, "The woman whom Thou gavest to be with me, she gave me from the tree, and I ate." The kids blame the parents.
- In the case of the kids blaming the parents, I will acknowledge that as we are growing up, as children, it is difficult to do right if parents don't guide us. But once we are out of the home, or at least once we are old enough to know right from wrong, we need to take charge of our lives and accept responsibility for doing right ourselves. It's the only way to stop the damage that is messing up our lives.
- The fourth and final stupid thing believers do to mess up their lives that I want you to see this morning is that:

4. They Shirk Responsibility For The Sake Of Keeping the Peace.

- Doesn't it seem to you that it was about time for Abram to take charge of this situation and begin to administer

the word of God to his bickering family? After all, he is the patriarch! He should have started with himself. "Listen folks, this whole thing started because I let it happen. I didn't have to consent to this fleshly scheme, but I did and I was wrong. I need you to forgive me for my foolishness. Now with that done, I need you, Sarai, to realize that this was your suggestion in the beginning. You brought it on yourself, so it's high time for you to stop pointing fingers of blame. You should have considered how Hagar would take this sudden elevation of position. And you, Hagar, you need to get off your high horse and remember that you are still a servant in this house and you must treat Sarai, my wife, with respect."

So did Abram do anything to administer righteousness in his home on this occasion, sorting out responsibility and seeing that those in his home assumed it fairly? Nope. As one writer said, in this case, he was "more of a pushover than a patriarch."

(Read v. 6a)

- He didn't want to rock the boat! He got that "dumb ox," "deer in the headlights" look in his eyes that some of you wives may have seen in the eyes of your husbands, and he said, "Do whatever you think is right, dear." He didn't want to deal with two bickering women. It was much easier to be a mouse than man.
- No, men, I'm not suggesting we turn into screaming tyrants in such a situation. No jack-boots and night-sticks, please! If that is what we have done in the past, perhaps that's the reason no one respects our leadership. What I am referring to is the righteous judgement of one who, familiar with the word of God, knows what God wants him to do to administer peace and justice in his home and is out front leading by his own example, starting with his own assumption of blame.
- Husbands are supposed to be the heads of their homes. Yet many don't even understand what that means. Neither do they raise a finger to begin to learn from God's word what it means. We teach it here on Sunday morning and that is the day they decided to stay home from church. We teach it on Sunday night but they never show up for that. The Sunday school teaches it but surely we can't expect them to be there for that! Heavens! What are we - a bunch of religious fanatics? Their wives are frustrated. Their kids are exasperated. And they are pusillanimous passives. Oh, let someone misplace the newspaper or the TV remote and they breathe fire. But there is no fire in their spiritual lives. In that realm they are mice and not men.
- When we read about Abraham, that mighty pioneer of faith that God says he was, we dare not read perfection. Just like us, he had some things to learn. Fortunately, he would go on to learn them.
- Let's finish the chapter here in Genesis.

(Read v. 6b)

- The one fleeing here is Hagar.

(Read v. 7)

- According to Genesis 25:18, "Shur" was "east of Egypt." Hagar was headed home to Egypt, a trip that she probably would not survive on her own, since it was desert and she had no animal or supplies. She had stopped by a spring when the angel of the Lord found her.

(Read v. 8-12)

- Hagar, like Sarai, would have many descendants, too. Ishmael, the son she was carrying in her womb, would be a "wild donkey of a man." He would be "against everyone," and everyone would be "against him." Ishmael became the ancestor of the Arabs, who are hostile to the Jews to this day.
- In fact, it could be said that the unrest that we are seeing in the Middle East today (there was another car bombing on the news just this past week) is the fruit of what went on in the tent of Abram and Sarai so many years ago when they decided to resort to the flesh rather than trust God's promises.

(Read v. 13-16)

Conclusion

- In an earlier day a certain young man was seeking a job as a Morse code telegraph operator. He found an advertisement in the want-ads and went to the address that was listed. When he arrived it was a large, busy, noisy office. In the background he could hear the chatter of a telegraph key. A sign instructed applicants to take a seat and wait until they were summoned to enter the inner office. Eight candidates had gotten there ahead of

him; they were seated along the wall. This was discouraging, but still he sat down to wait.

- After about two or three minutes the young man stood up, stepped over to the door of the inner office, and walked in. Naturally all of the other applicants started looking at each other and muttering. Within about three minutes the young man came back out the door with the employer who said, "You gentlemen may go now. The position has been filled." Several of them began to grumble. One spoke up and said, "I don't understand. He was the last to come in. We never even got a chance to be interviewed, and he got the job."
- That's not fair."
- The employer said, "All the time you've been sitting here the telegraph key has been ticking out a message. It said, 'If you understand this message, come right in. The job is yours.' None of you heard it. He did. He got the job."
- These four stupid things that believers do to mess up their lives don't have to be so common among us.
- We need to listen! If we listen, we can get it right.
- Don't let desperate fleshly desire overrule your good sense.
Don't get your counsel from those who don't know the word of God.
Don't blame others for things you have brought on yourself.
Don't shirk responsibility for the sake of keeping the peace.

Prayer:

- Heavenly Father, we read your word but find that your word reads us like a book. You know us, Lord. You know our coming and going. You know our motives and our puny means. Help us hear the telegraph ticking and understand its message. Help us stop the damage that disregarding Your word can bring to ourselves and our loved ones. Give us your mercy, we pray, for the times when we have foolishly disregarded your guidance. Give us sanity, Lord, we pray, in a day when insanity and disregard for You seem to rule. In Jesus' Name. Amen.