

Forcing the Issue

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 20th of August 2000.

The preacher is Paul Barker and his sermon is entitled Forcing the Issue and is from Genesis chapter 16 verses 1 to 16.

And I invite you to turn in the Black Bibles either on the pew or in front of you at knee height to page 11 to the first Bible reading from Genesis chapter 16.

And let me explain for those visiting today that over the last few weeks we've been looking at some of these chapters leading up to this one dealing with the story of a man called Abram. And I'll pray that God will help us to understand what we're going to look at now.

God, we pray that as we hear this passage preached your word will rest in our hearts enlighten our minds and inspire us to patient trust and obedience in you and of your promises.

[1 : 20] We pray this for Jesus' sake. Amen. Periodically the newspapers give us the results of various surveys. And one of the ones that crops up from time to time is who do we trust?

Politicians are always at the bottom. Doesn't matter what party they are they're at the bottom. Hardly anybody ever trusts a politician. Real estate agents are not usually much above them in the list.

Apologies to those of you who are real estate agents. Used car salesmen they're not rated very highly they're not usually people that we trust. The media we tend not to trust because of the things they say that aren't always true.

Sometimes the surveys tell us that bank managers are not people that we trust very much. And one of the recent trends in the last 10 or 20 years plummeting down the list of trust are clergy.

Less and less do people trust the clergy. But one of the trends generally is that we trust fewer and fewer people.

[2 : 28] Not just the categories I've mentioned but more and more we trust less and less anyone. Any occupation. Even our doctors spouses parents or children.

And if asked though the surveys never ask it most people lack at some point trust in God. That God is not really trustworthy.

He cannot really be trusted. And people I suspect would say in response to that question about is God trustworthy I say no. They would respond by saying God promises us joy but my life has been full of depression.

that God promises that he can heal the sick and yet my health is poor and in decline. God promises that his blessings extend to our children and our children's children but I can see my children and my grandchildren not as Christians and not worshipping God.

People might say that the God who promises great peace in the world fails to deliver on that promise. every page of the newspaper almost is a story of the lack of peace in people's or country's lives.

[3 : 47] Some would say that God can't be trusted. I've prayed to him for years about this issue or this person and he just refuses to answer my prayers. And I no longer trust him anymore.

I don't see the point in praying the point in reading the Bible the point in singing his praises or even coming to church. I don't think God can be trusted. Of all the people who could accuse God of not being trustworthy Abram had good reason to.

Aged 75 and childless his wife was barren he was promised by God outrageously really that he would have a child but not just a child but he would actually become the father of a great nation of people.

What an amazing promise to make to a barren wife and a man who is 75 and without children. But God didn't make that promise just once.

We saw that one a few weeks ago in chapter 12. He reiterated the promises in chapter 13 and then last week you saw him reiterate the promise of children yet again with great emphasis in chapter 15.

[5 : 05] Ten years pass. Abram's now in his mid 80s. Sarai his wife is still barren. Perhaps Abram thought it must have been a joke.

God's playing games with me. Or maybe he thought what good are God's promises he's just not trustworthy. I believe that he promised it but he's not done anything about it and now I'm in my mid 80s what hope is there of this promise being fulfilled?

Can God really be trusted? With the things that he says? Well in their mid 80s Sarai Abram's wife had still not given him any children and she said to Abram you see that the Lord has prevented me from bearing children.

There's almost a sense of accusation there that it's God's fault. so she says to him to her husband go into my slave girl Hagar an Egyptian woman it may be that I shall obtain children by her we should not recoil at this sort of immorality being suggested in scripture it was an ancient Near Eastern custom that if a woman was barren it could be that she would give her own maid servant to her husband in order to produce children that would be regarded as the wife's children not the maid's so notice that Sarai says to Abram it may be that I shall obtain children by her that was her ploy it was a standard ancient Near Eastern custom even if it's immoral in our own day and age for such sort of things to happen well Abraham her husband accepted the idea and he took Hagar the Egyptian we're told in verse 3 her slave girl and

Sarai took her gave her to Abram as a wife and he went into Hagar and she conceived Abram does what probably most of us would have done as well he takes matters into his own hands he thinks that God isn't able to or isn't going to fulfill his promise of producing a child through Abram and Sarai and so he seeks to fulfill the promise in his own way he forces the issue if you see the pun in that there were no IVF procedures in those days there was no medical sort of way that he could deal with the problem or Sarai could deal with the problem and so he decides to take matters into his own hands and produce a child he could and so it's not the right thing to do there's an undercurrent of blame here on Abram and Sarai for what their ploy is the language here is reminiscent of the garden of Eden with Adam and Eve where they deliberately disobeyed

[8 : 00] God by eating forbidden fruit from a tree in the garden of Eden Eve of course eating first and then passing it on to Adam so Adam is accused in Genesis 3 of listening to the voice of his wife the same statement is made of Abram listening to the voice of his wife not that husbands shouldn't listen to their wives but the point is that here their wife's advice in both cases was clearly wrong and just as Eve took the fruit and gave it to Adam the same expressions are used of Sarai who takes Hagar and gives her to her husband as well and just as Eve blames Adam for the sin so too passes the blame on so too does Sarai blame Abram so in verse 5 Sarai said to Abram may the wrong done to me be on you I gave my slave girl to your embrace and when she saw that she'd conceived she looked on me with contempt she's blaming Abram now for the breakdown in relationships within the sort of extended family sort of structure because her maid has conceived now at one level the temptation for Abram to have relations with Hagar to produce a child is very plausible

God hasn't done anything for 10 years to produce a child he's made a promise and nothing's happened so he could well be justified for thinking well hang on a minute God's made a promise maybe it's now up to me to do something about it so he decides to have sexual relations with Hagar Sarai's initiative maybe there's a sense here that many of us would agree with that really God helps those who help themselves so it's my initiative that will prompt God fulfilling the promises my initiative, my action me doing something about it will somehow provoke God to answer our prayers maybe there's a sense of the end justifying the means the end being the promises of God being fulfilled that's a good end so in a sense that will justify the means by having relationships with Hagar maybe even there's a thinking that God needs a hand a helping hand from us but in the end this temptation is just another of Satan's shortcuts a quick fix answer see ours is not the only age that likes quick fix answers

Abram was the same I think instant solutions are not just our own modern preoccupation Satan's temptations at every point in the Bible are bypasses and shortcuts so when Jesus was in the wilderness for 40 days being tempted by Satan Satan promised him all authority something that Jesus had a right to but the temptation is that it's a shortcut it's a bypass from the long way round that goes necessarily through the cross and death and resurrection of Jesus and hence it's wrong

and the same in the Garden of Eden the serpent's temptations to Adam and Eve were really a bypass that they could each of the tree of life in the middle of the garden but bypass obedience to God again it's wrong and for Abram the same sort of thing now he faces a temptation to bypass patient waiting and trust in God's promises by taking the initiative himself to produce a child Abram gives up waiting and he tries to do it all himself now I think if I was Abram I would have given up many years before him one of the things I struggle with is being impatient and I hate waiting in queues I'm clearly not an Englishman just the other day I went to the post office I picked the shortest queue and suddenly realised that the person at the front of the queue had some very long and very complicated arrangement being made so I changed queues the queue on their right was going much faster as soon as I joined it it stopped moving I changed again and by the time that I got served I think I'd been in the shop longer than anybody else in the shop including all the employees it seemed to me the bank was no better that was worse I almost vowed to change banks I was getting so agitated and annoyed at standing in a queue for 20 minutes while all the staff seemed to go on extended lunch breaks at least though my day was redeemed when I got to Coles and for once in my life

I actually picked a queue that was fast Abram gave up waiting for God to fulfil his promises and he tried to do it all himself but as we see here God hasn't given up on his promises and he hasn't given up on Abram either and God intervenes in two ways now as a result of this story firstly he intervenes with Hagar and then with Abram himself Hagar flees Abram and Sarai Sarai's treating her badly and harshly so she ran away it seems that she heads off back towards Egypt from which she had come at some point and somewhere in the wilderness we're told in verse 7 by a well or a spring of water she's sitting down maybe resting on her way back to Egypt an angel of the Lord finds her as though the angel had gone searching for her in the wilderness and says to her knows her name Hagar slave girl of Sarai where have you come from where are you going although presumably knows the answer to that and she said

[13:45] I'm running away from my mistress Sarai and then the angel says to her firstly a command return to your mistress and submit to her something that no doubt she would have been rather unwilling to do given the harsh treatment she'd found at Sarai's hands but then the angel makes an extraordinary promise now to Hagar I will so greatly multiply your offspring that they cannot be counted for multitude amazing promise made to this slave girl and maybe when she goes back to Abram and says to him what the angel had said to her Abram could well have thought well this is the fulfillment of promise because Abram had been promised a descendants that would be a vast multitude and now he's produced an heir through Hagar who's been made the same sort of promise maybe Abraham would feel justified in the action that he'd taken when she comes back and then she's told about the child that she has already conceived that he is a son and you shall name him

Ishmael for the Lord has given heed to your affliction the name Ishmael means God hearing she goes back to Abram and to Sarai and later on at the end of the chapter she has the son and she does what she's been commanded and she calls him Ishmael because God has heard her affliction as she traveled in the wilderness maybe Abram at this point still thinks that he's done the right thing maybe he thinks this is God fulfilling his promises and another 13 or 14 years pass till Abram is 99 years old at this point Ishmael is perhaps 13 just becoming a teenager and God speaks to Abram this time there's no record of God speaking to Abram in those years intervening from the conception of Ishmael to this point at the beginning of chapter 17 but now he speaks to him is he going to congratulate him that he's now got the heir that he promised many years before 25 years ago that this is the one through whom all those promises of God will be fulfilled is he going to thank Abram for actually providing a solution for the promises being fulfilled thanks Abram

I couldn't do anything because your wife was barren so thank you for being able to find someone else to produce an heir through or perhaps he's going to obliterate and punish Abram God speaks and says to him I am God almighty walk before me and be blameless the first ethical or moral command that God has made to Abram at any point in Abram's life but it hints at his previous failure there's just a hint of saying Abram now walk before me and be blameless that is because you haven't been like that in the past your action in producing an heir through Hagar was not blameless action and it was not walking before me that is an idiom that means be devoted to me an expression of allegiance to me Abram had failed and God calls him in effect to repentance calling him now to walk blamelessly but then God's next words reiterate the promise all over again for the

fourth time in 25 years and I will make my covenant between me and you and will make you exceedingly numerous and the implication is it's not going to be through Ishmael who is already your son he says

Abram falls on his face and God then says to him as for me this is my covenant with you you shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations not even just one nation now but a multitude of nations no longer shall your name be Abram but your name shall be Abraham we lose the significance of that but in Hebrew Abram means exalted father Abraham means father of many nations so God is not just reiterating the promise but he's actually changing Abram's name if you like as a guarantee that God will keep the promise and then he goes on in verse 6 I will make you exceedingly fruitful and I will make nations of you and kings shall come from you God's actually adding to his promise here of descendants that some amongst the descendants will even be kings I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant to be God to you and to your offspring after you some people are rich in promise you probably know people family or friends or colleagues who are always promising you something but they never deliver they always promise you that they'll be there on time but they're always late I've got a friend in England who has a twin brother in Perth whom he's never visited in 30 years in Perth and whenever I see my friend in England he says I promise you that the next time we meet it'll be in Australia because I'll come and I'll visit you and I'll write to you and I'll ring you up but he never does and I don't believe that he will whenever I get a letter from this friend David I'm very surprised and I'll be even more surprised if he ever does visit that is I don't mean to put him down particularly but it's just one example of somebody who's rich in promise always saying they're going to do something but never actually delivering the goods Abram could well have thought here is God making his promise yet again here's a man whose words just sort of tumble out full of promises but what's he doing about it it's now 24 years after the first promise was made Abram's 99 surely it's beyond possibility that he and his wife Sarai are actually going to have a child

[19:56] God what's wrong with Ishmael he can be the one but no God stands by his promise he does two things now for Abram the first thing is rather unusual in verse 10 of chapter 17 he commands Abram to be circumcised this is my covenant which you shall keep between me and you and your offspring after you every male among you shall be circumcised that is his sons and future generations but also the male servants in his household as well you shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskins and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you what a bizarre thing to command at this point it's not for health reasons Abram commands circumcision as a sign of covenant promise but why that why not have a sign that everybody can see and that the women could participate in why not say to

Abram Abram I want you and Sarai to have a fish symbol on your forehead then everyone will know that you belong to me and it's obvious and everyone's included but no the sign is private for men only nobody usually would notice so what's going on here why does God bring out suddenly the command of circumcision at this point and why is it a covenant sign of God's promises the issue is that Abram has failed to trust those promises and physically his action that reflected his failure to trust God's promises was sexual relations with his wife's maid Hagar and so at the very point of failure so to speak God commands physical circumcision as a reminder that God will produce heirs and descendants he will keep his promise but also as a hidden rebuke presumably every time Abram has some sort of sexual activity circumcision will remind him that he failed to keep God's promises he failed to patiently wait for God to fulfill his promise and circumcision will be for him and his descendants and his household a permanent reminder of their obligation to trust in God the second thing that God does is he gives him and Sarah a child he's not born till chapter 21 but in the pages that follow Isaac is conceived and then born God you see keeps his word he is faithful we may think God had fallen asleep for 24 years and not done anything about his promise but God is faithful and he keeps his promises in his own time sometimes in our lives it seems that circumstances imply that that God is absent he's not doing anything he's not involved in our life or the life of our world or community he's not keeping his promises he promises that the church will prevail against Satan but we see a church around the world that is in many respects weak he promises that he will be with

Christians to the end of the age and yet many of us experience difficulties as though God is absent from us he promises to answer prayer and yet many of us pray and it seems that our prayers are not answered by God maybe what God is doing is testing our faith maybe what he's doing with

Abram is seeing whether Abram has got the sustenance that faith in God requires the perseverance to keep on trusting despite appearances maybe he's seeking to strengthen Abram's faith that for 24 years he should trust and believe that God will keep his promise though it looks as though he's not doing that that's what Christian faith's about it's about trusting God's word regardless of our circumstances it's about trusting God despite what seems to be going on or not going on in the world so Christians will ever give evidence of their faith by their behavior just as Abram Abram's lack of faith was seen in in his behavior by having sexual relations with his wife's maid so too will our faith be evidenced in our behavior so that if we are people of Christian faith we'll refrain for example from sexual immorality because we know that God's promises are for those who are pure from sexual immorality if we are faithful Christians we will keep on praying as a regular pattern of our daily lives because we know that God will answer our prayers in his time faithfully even if it seems that he's slow in doing so if we are faithful Christians then we will take seriously our obligation to be in church because God commands that of us as a regular pattern of our daily life and so on and so forth that's what Christian faith is it is trusting in God's word and it is a trust that will see evidence in the way we behave and live our lives but God's rebuke to Abram is also a warning to us

[25 : 34] Abram was rebuked for his lack of trust and the physical mark of circumcision was a constant reminder of that rebuke but it's just an external reminder doesn't actually in the end correct the real heart of the problem it's a bit like baptism which we'll observe in a few minutes like circumcision it is an external act it is a sign in itself it is not the actual spiritual reality but it is a sign of expressing faith in God and his promises but what God actually does for us is greater than physical circumcision and greater than water baptism because the external circumcision that God commanded Abram and his descendants is superseded in the Bible later by something else it is superseded by God circumcising the hearts of his people not literally taking out a knife and cutting around our heart of course but God doing something spiritually inside us and so the sign of external physical circumcision for Abram was pointing towards a greater future act of

God who would get inside and change our hearts and in a similar way the baptism will have this morning of Matthew is just a sign an external event of something greater that God will do we pray by faith in the heart of Matthew that is change his heart and give him faith that he may grow up trusting and obeying the Lord Jesus Christ in itself the water baptism is nothing it's just an external sign what matters is the faith is God working in Matthew's heart and life and the same with circumcision what matters is not physical circumcision but God working in the hearts changing the hearts of his people so then we have to ask ourselves well is our heart circumcised have we been changed has God worked in my heart or not and if we are Christian people trusting in the death of Jesus for our forgiveness and salvation the answer to that is clearly yes the New Testament tells us for example for a person is not a

Jew who is one outwardly nor is true circumcision something external and physical rather a person is a Jew who is one inwardly and real circumcision is a matter of the heart it is spiritual and not literal where does that happen St Paul tells us in another place in Christ also you are circumcised with a spiritual circumcision by putting off the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ when you are buried with him in baptism you are also raised with him through faith in the power of God who raised him from the dead and when you are dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh God made you alive together with him when he forgave us all our trespasses just as physical circumcision is a sign of some future act of God in our lives so to water baptism a sign of God working in our hearts and it happens when we place our allegiance and trust and faith in the death and resurrection of

Jesus when we're identified in his death and his resurrection as Christian people then God works in our hearts circumcising them changing them refining them and purifying them the job's not complete yet in any of our hearts we ought to know that very well but we can be sure that the promises of God stand that on the day when we walk through the gates of heaven then and then only will our hearts be perfect and pure in God's sight now just as a foretaste a guarantee of God fulfilling that promise he's begun to work and change our hearts as we're identified in Jesus death and resurrection and as we receive God's own spirit you see in the end Abram's problem and fault and sin was not just sexual activity with the wrong woman it was that his heart was not right with God that he failed to trust God and hence he disobeyed God gave him a physical sign but it was pointing to what needed to happen in Abram's heart so too for us but thankfully

God has done that for us in the Lord Jesus Christ let me encourage you if you haven't already done so place your faith and trust in him your lives of faith will give clear evidence of that in the way you live your life the priorities you have praying being with God's people regularly serving him and loving him and we look forward with faith and confidence to the day when we arrive in heaven's gates our hearts fully pure fully changed God's gracious work in them let's pray oh God our heavenly father we thank you for the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and for the gift of his spirit in our hearts and lives thank you that you are keeping your promise to change us from the inside continue to do that we pray so that we may give glory to him now in our lives and be with him for eternity in your heaven we pray this for Jesus sake amen