

Impatient Faith

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[0 : 00] What do you think? Do you think the end justifies the means? Do you think the end justifies the means? Do you think there are situations in life that are so important, where the end goal is so vital, it's okay to use whatever means necessary to achieve them, even if those means are less than godly? Think about a violent crime in Melbourne these days. I don't know if you're like me, but I feel like every day there's another violent crime when I turn the TV on.

What if the police resorted to guerrilla tactics and violence of their own if it meant catching the bad guys? Does the end justify the means? What about the rescue of the boys from the cave in Thailand? I don't know about you, but our family was gripped with the coverage. Amazing stuff, and we don't believe in this, but if we did, I'd like to be reincarnated as one of those Navy SEALs. Did you see those guys? Like real men, weren't they? Like so brave, amazing stuff. But one of those Navy SEALs died, didn't he, during the rescue? If the rescue effort knew that at the beginning, would the end rescue still justify the means? Christianly speaking, God is going to make us all righteous, or makes us righteous by the means of faith. But is it okay to attempt righteousness by other means? What if I trust in myself and the quality or the quantity of my faith and how I never doubt? Would the end still justify the means? Here is a passage today all about whether the end justifies the means, and the end is the unbelievable promises God makes to Abram. We've been saying them every week, so a great name, a land, offspring, and a blessing to the world. But today, we'll see that Abram and Sarai attempt ungodly means to try and achieve that amazing end. And every week, the message has been every week, trust in the Lord, just like Abram. He's the model of faith. But today, he's a model of what not to do. And so the message today is, don't distrust the Lord. Don't be like Abram. And it kind of sounds like the same message. So trust in the Lord, don't distrust the Lord. It's kind of the same message in nuanced ways to reinforce the point. And actually, the Bible does that quite often.

It gives you the same message in different ways, positively, negatively, perhaps, to reinforce the same point. So for the past few weeks, chapter 12, trust the Lord to bless. Chapter 13, trust the Lord in spite of appearances. Chapter 14, trust the Lord in spite of the odds. Chapter 15, trust the Lord to be counted righteous. And this week, don't distrust the Lord. It's the same message every week in a more nuanced way to reinforce the point. And this week, our author, he widens the lens to include Abram's wife, Sarai. We see that Sarai is trying to achieve God's plans, but her way.

Doesn't the end justify the means? And the answer is our first point on your handout. Let's pick up the story in verse one. Now, Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children, but she had an Egyptian slave named Hagar.

So she said to Abram, the Lord has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my slave.

Perhaps I can build a family through her. Here we see Sarai calling the shots. She's not turning her back on God.

She's not become a pagan. She still thinks that with God, there is a good end. She's concerned for his plans. But we're now 10 years in to Abram and the Lord and not a baby in sight.

[4 : 02] She takes matters into her own hands. And after 10 years of waiting on the Lord at her old age, you can understand her impatience. She wants God's plans, but can't wait for his timing.

It's her way instead. So verse two. So Sarai said to Abram, the Lord has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my slave. Sarai's way is a form of surrogacy that will finally give Abram some offspring. It's God's plans her way. She says, perhaps I can build a family through her.

Last week, Abram trusted in the Lord to do everything. But now the attitude is perhaps that I can build it instead. And Abram in verse two, halfway through, he agreed to what Sarai said.

Verse three. So after Abram had been living in Canaan 10 years, Sarai, his wife, took her Egyptian slave, Hagar, and gave her to her husband to be his wife. He slept with Hagar and she conceived.

And yeah, like finally, Abram has some offspring. Well done. But does the end justify the means? And the answer is no. No, distrusting the Lord leads to misery. Distrusting the Lord leads to misery. [5 : 27] And there are some ominous words in these verses. It says that Abram agreed to what Sarai said. But the better translation of that is actually Abram listened to the voice of his wife.

Last week, he listened to the voice of the Lord. This week, to the voice of his wife. And that language, if you recognize it, that's the language of Genesis three in the Garden of Eden. Remember when Adam listened to the voice of his wife, Eve? We're also told that Sarai took her Egyptian slave and gave it to her husband.

That's the same sequence of verbs in the Garden of Eden where Eve took the fruit and gave it to her husband. The message today, don't distrust the Lord. It leads to misery.

And growing up, for us in this room, this side of salvation history, we already know how this story is going to end. It's very hard to preach Old Testament stories with any real suspense because you already know how things work out.

[6 : 29] Eventually, we know that God keeps his word and Abram and Sarai have Isaac, the son of blessing. And so you can't say that distrust leads to destruction because we know that God blesses them regardless.

Sarai schemes don't derail God's plans. But along the way, their distrust causes misery and mess for everyone involved. And it all starts immediately.

Halfway through verse four. When Hagar knew she was pregnant, she began to despise her mistress. And Sarai said to Abram, you are responsible for the wrong I'm suffering.

I put my slave in your arms and now she knows that she's pregnant. She despises me. May the Lord judge between you and me. And there begins the strife and the disorder in Abram's household.

So Hagar despises Sarah, her mistress. Verse four and verse five. It was Sarai's plan the whole time. But in verse five, she blames Abram.

[7 : 31] You are responsible, she says. Between Abram and Sarai, a disunity in their marriage. May the Lord judge between you and me, she says. What about Abram?

A couple of weeks ago, he was so brave in battle in chapter 14. Now he cowardly washes his hands of the incident. In verse six, your slave is in your hands, he says.

Do with her whatever you think is best. And then poor old Hagar, ill-treated and fleeing from the family. See, Abram was supposed to be a blessing for the world.

But as far as Hagar's concerned, he's brought her nothing but misery and mess. She's pregnant, alone and abused. She's a victim.

She's caught up in the crossfire of the distrust in the Lord. And it leads to misery. And that basically is our first scene inside the mess of Abram's household.

[8 : 33] He's far from the hero that we understand him to be from the New Testament. He's a mixed bag, really. Sometimes he's really good, chapters 12 and 13 and 14.

Sometimes he's really bad, chapters 12 and 15 and today, chapter 16. He's certainly not good all the time. Yet God declares him righteous.

Says he's the model of faith. God is showing his faithfulness to his word. He promised to be a man. And I wonder, therefore, if that points us to something bigger about God rather than Abram. That God blesses us even when we distrust him.

We're saved by grace alone. Because God kindly and freely does everything. And we do nothing, as Abram shows.

God is showing his faithfulness to his word. God is showing his faithfulness to his faithfulness to his faithfulness to his faithfulness. He promised to bless Abram regardless of what Abram does.

Remember last week we said that God alone legally binds himself to keep this promise.

[9 : 42] Remember that God alone walked through those animal pieces of the covenant. And it's just as well because if Abram was responsible for fulfilling the covenant, he would have broken his word just one chapter later.

God kindly and graciously does everything and we do nothing. And kindness and graciousness is what we see with God and Hagar in verse 7 to 16.

The story of Hagar here does not move the story of Abram on at all. You could actually cut it out of the whole Bible. In fact, it doesn't progress the narrative at all.

But it just gives us another glimpse of our God. Remember, we are only 16 chapters into the whole Bible. We are still learning who God is, what he's like and what he wants.

And here we see how gracious and kind he is even to pagan strangers like Hagar. And you can see this in our second point. Verse 7.

[10:45] The angel of the Lord found Hagar near a spring in the desert. It was a spring that is beside the road to Shur. And he said, Hagar, slave of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?

I'm running away from my mistress, she answered. Mistress Sarah, she answered. Hagar meets the angel of the Lord who tells her exactly what she doesn't want to hear. Verse 9.

He says, go back to your mistress and submit to her. Thanks very much. But the Lord is extraordinarily kind to her. In verse 10. He says, the angel added, I will increase your descendants so much that they will be too numerous to count.

There's that language again. It sounds like God is making another covenant with Hagar. Remember with Abram, it was descendants more than the dust of the earth and more than the stars in the sky. Here it is descendants too numerous to count. However, it's clear that Hagar's descendants are not going to be the ones of blessing and promise.

[11:49] And you can see that in verse 11. The angel of the Lord said, also said to her, you are now pregnant and you will give birth to a son. You shall name him Ishmael. For the Lord has heard of your misery.

He will be a wild donkey of a man. His hand will be against everyone and everyone's hand against him. And he will live in hostility toward all his brothers. We're told that Ishmael was a wild donkey of a man, which no doubt means he was fiercely independent and stubborn.

Probably incapable of working well and living well with others. No wonder there is hostility wherever he goes. Clearly he is not the son of promise and blessing.

But God is just being incredibly kind to Hagar, his mum. Abram and Sarai distrust the Lord. It leads to misery for Hagar.

But here is God giving her an enormous family of her own. And in verse 13, our author tells us how to interpret these events.

[12:55] Verse 13, Hagar gave this name to the Lord who spoke to her. You are the God who sees me. For she said, I have now seen the one who sees me.

That is why the well was called Beelahai Roy. It is still there between Kadesh and Bered. We're told in verse 7 that God found her. In verse 8, that he spoke to her.

He knew who she was. He says, Hagar, slave of Sarai. Again, in verse 8, we see his concern for her. Where have you come from? Where are you going? In verse 11, her son is called Ishmael, which means God hears.

And here in verse 13, the author shows us what to make of it all. He is the God who sees her. He cares for her. She's not an inheritor of covenant blessings.

Just someone caught up in the crossfire of the mess of Abram and Sarah's distrust. But in his kindness, he looks after her. He helps her in the misery.

[14:02] You see, the whole Bible is tightly focused around the promises to Abram, Isaac and Jacob. Promises that are eventually fulfilled and enhanced when King Jesus arrives.

And this passage shows that when his people distrust in the Lord, it causes misery and ruin relationships. Yet here is God picking up the pieces of Sarah, of Hagar's misery.

But I'm not sure we can say that God will always do that. I'm not sure we can say God will always be there to pick up the pieces like he did for Hagar.

I'm not sure this passage has anything at all to say about pregnancy or IVF or anything like that. I think that is too people focused. Rather, Genesis 16 provides us with a snapshot of what God is like.

He's gracious and kind. He's concerned for everyone, even for pagans like Hagar. And so let's apply everything we've said.

[15:06] Let's put all this together as we think about this. Does the end justify the means? Let's work through some examples together. This is our last point application.

So does the end justify the means? What about getting to heaven? Getting to heaven. That is probably the best of ends, isn't it? God said we get there by trusting him alone.

But what if we add our own way? What if we add a bit of works to it? Let's say church attendance. Some of you get really good marks there.

What about silent retreats? Silent retreats are all a rage at the moment in Christian circles? What about keeping his commandments? How well do you score out of 10 on the 10 commandments? Pilgrimages to Israel? What about all that? God's end? My way. The Bible says it leads to misery. And it would too because I would exhaust myself and all of you with my religious law keeping.

[16:10] What about building God's church? That's another great end. God's end is to have the church built up. But God says his church is built as his word is preached.

But what if we adopt other means? Let's use powerful music. Charismatic experiences. Let's have cutting edge cultural engagement.

Does the end justify the means? No. It leads to misery and mess. It'll turn our church into a show and a performance where only select individuals get more puffed up.

What about evangelism? Evangelism is trying to save your family and friends. It's a brilliant end for them, obviously. God's means is for us to tell them with words Jesus' gospel.

But let's ignore that way. Let's use our own way. Why don't we? Let's change the message a little bit. Let's get rid of sin and judgment. It's far too negative. Let's make it more attractive to everyone around.

[17:16] I know. Why don't we make it a gospel where everyone is saved regardless? Why can't we do that? Does the end justify the means? The answer is don't distrust the Lord.

It causes misery and ruin as people wouldn't be saved because that is no gospel at all. And finally, what about attracting people to our church?

Again, a really good end. God's means is that we remain distinct in the world. That we are the salt in the world. But let's ignore God's means.

Let's bring on our own way. Why don't we try to make a church that's as relevant to our culture as possible? Maybe we could change our ethical stance on things just to get more people through the doors.

Maybe we can be solely focused on social and political engagement instead. What if we turn church to be all about us and how we are served rather than about the service of God and his people?

[18:20] Does the end justify the means? It would lead to misery as our church turns into every other organization in Melbourne. God's word to us today.

Don't distrust the Lord. He's unbelievably kind and gracious. But God's end, our way, leads to misery and mess along the way.

And so let's pray. Father God, we thank you for your word. Help us learn the lesson of Abram and Sarai. To trust you and not to distrust you.

Father, we're sorry for the subtle ways we depart from your means by adding our own ways. We're sorry for all the misery and mess that we cause. We're sorry for the innocent people who've been caught up in the crossfire of our distrust.

Father, we thank you for your nature. Thank you that you're a God who sees, who cares and who looks after. Father, thank you that as our sin abounds, that your grace abounds more and more.

[19:28] In Jesus' name. Amen.