

Impatient Faith

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Preacher: Vijay Henderson

[0 : 0 0] A great question to chat about with someone over a tea and coffee later. Do you think the end justifies the means? Are there situations in life where the end goal is so important that it's okay to use whatever means necessary to achieve them, even if those means are less than honourable?

I think about violent crime in Melbourne these days. Every day I turn on the news and there's another attack of some sort going on. I wonder if you've thought the same thing. Is it okay if the police resort to guerrilla tactics and sort of violence of their own to get the bad guys?

Does the end justify the means? What about the rescue of those young boys from the cave in Thailand? Amazing, wasn't it? In our household, we were gripped with the coverage.

Every night my wife would turn it on in the middle of the night to see if another young chap was rescued. And we don't believe this, but if we did believe in reincarnation, I want to come back to life as one of those Navy SEALs.

Did you see them? They were like real men, weren't they? Just total heroes. I loved it. But one of those Navy SEALs died, didn't he? In the rescue.

[1 : 1 5] Very sad. But if the rescue effort knew that at the beginning, would the end rescue still justify the means? Christianly speaking, God's end is for us to be counted righteous.

That is to be friends with him. God's means to achieve this is by faith alone. Counted righteous by faith. But what if we do our own means?

Do it our way? So is it okay if I trust in myself? Is it okay if I trust in how much or the quality of my faith or the quantity of my faith instead?

Will the end justify the means? Here is a passage today all about the question, does the end justify the means? And the end is the unbelievable promises God makes to Abram.

We've said them every week. A great name, a land, offspring, and a blessing. They're the end. But today we'll see Abram and Sarai try to achieve this end through other means.

[2 : 2 5] And every week the message has been trust in the Lord, like Abram. Abram is the model of faith. But today, he is a model of what not to do.

And so the message is, don't distrust the Lord. Don't be like Abram. And trusting the Lord each week and not distrusting the Lord, it's kind of the same message, isn't it?

Trust the Lord, don't distrust the Lord. It's the same message. But often the Bible gives you the same message in nuanced ways to drive the point home. And so the past few weeks, chapter 12, trust in the Lord to bless.

Chapter 13, trust in the Lord in spite of appearances. Chapter 14, trust in the Lord despite the odds. Chapter 15, trust in the Lord to be counted righteous.

It's the same message each week in nuanced ways to drive the point home. And this week is no different. Don't distrust the Lord. Same message in nuanced ways.

- [3 : 34] And this week, the author widens the lens to include Abram's wife, Sarai. We see her trying to achieve God's plans her way.
- Doesn't the end justify the means, though? And the answer is our first point. Let's pick up the story in verse 1. Here we see Sarai calling the shots.
- She's not turning her back on God altogether. She hasn't become a pagan. She still is concerned for his plans, still sees them as a good end.
- But we're now 10 years into Abram and God and their relationship and not a baby in sight. So she takes matters into her own hands.
- And after 10 years of waiting on the Lord, and especially at her old age, you can understand her impatience. She wants God's plans, but her way.
- [4 : 53] She can't wait for his timing. And so verse 2. 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 gives Abram some offspring. 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 this week, the attitude is perhaps I can build a family. Abram agreed to what Sarai said.
- And so after Abram had been living in Canaan 10 years, Sarai took 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, now Abram has some offspring well done. But does the end justify the means? And the answer is no.
- [5 : 58] Distrusting the Lord leads to misery. Distrusting the Lord leads to misery. And there are some ominous words in these verses here. It says that Abram agreed to what Sarai said.
- But a better translation is actually, Abram listened to the voice of his wife. Last week, Abram listened to the voice of the Lord. This week, to the voice of his wife instead.
- And I wonder if you remember where those words come from. They're a tragic echo back to the Garden of Eden. When Eve listened to the voice. So Adam listened to the voice of his wife, Eve.
- We're also told here that Sarai took her Egyptian slave and gave her to her husband. That's the same sequence of verbs from the Garden of Eden.
- Eve took the fruit and gave it to her husband. The message today is don't distrust the Lord. It leads to misery. And for us here in the room, growing up this side of salvation history, we already know how the story of Abram and Sarai work out, don't we?
- [7 : 07] It's really hard to preach this story with any real suspense, because you know how it ends. Eventually, God keeps his word, doesn't he? We know that Isaac comes along pretty soon.
- He's the true son of promise. And so you can't say that distrust leads to total destruction, because God blesses them regardless, as we'll see in the coming chapters.
- Yes. Sarai's scheme doesn't derail God's plans, but along the way, and this is the main idea, along the way, distrust causes misery.
- And it all starts immediately. Have a look halfway through verse 4. When Hagar knew she was pregnant, she began to despise her mistress.
- Then Sarai said to Abram, You are responsible for the wrong I'm suffering. I put my slave in your arms, and now that she knows she's pregnant, she despises me. May the Lord judge between you and me.
- [8 : 09] There begins a disorder and a strife in the household. Hagar despises Sarah, verse 4 and verse 5. It was Sarah's plans the whole time, but she, in verse 5, blames Abram.

You are responsible, she says. What about Abram? He was so brave in battle in chapter 14, and now he cowardly washes his hands of the whole thing.

He says in verse 6, Your slave is in your hands. Do whatever you think is best. And then between Abram and Sarai, a disunity.

May the Lord judge between you and me. A division. And then for poor old Hagar, she's ill-treated, we're told. She fled from Sarai.

Abram was supposed to be a man of blessing. Blessing to the world. But for poor old Hagar, he's brought her nothing but misery. She's pregnant and alone and abused.

[9 : 14] She's a victim. She's caught up in the crossfire. Don't distrust the Lord, Abram and Sarai. It leads to misery.

And that is our first scene inside the mess of Abram's household. He's far from the hero of faith that we hear about in 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 16. He's certainly not all good all the time as we think he is from the New Testament.

But God declares him righteous or his friend. God says he's the model of faith. And I wonder then if that points us to something bigger about God rather than Abram himself.

I think it says that God blesses us even when we distrust him along the way. We are saved by grace alone. God kindly and freely does everything and we do nothing.

[10 : 24] God is faithful to his own word even when we are not in spite of what Abram does. Remember last week we said that God alone legally binds himself to bless Abram.

Remember God alone walks through the pieces of the cut animals of covenant. And it's just as well. Because if Abram had also walked with God and taken responsibility for 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 when God deals with Hagar, a random stranger, a foreigner.

In verse 7 to 16, it doesn't move the story of Abram on at all. You could almost cut verses 7 to 16 out of the whole Bible.

It doesn't further the narrative at all but just gives us another glimpse of what our God is like. Remember we're only 16 chapters into the whole Bible.

[11 : 37] We are still learning who God is and what he's like. And this is saying that he is gracious and kind even to pagan strangers like Hagar.

And you can see that in our second point. Let's read from verse 7. The angel of the Lord found Hagar near a spring in the desert. It was the 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, Sarai, she answered. Hagar meets the angel of the Lord who tells her what she doesn't want to hear.

In 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, the angel added, I will increase your descendants so much that they will be too numerous to count.

Amazing. It sounds like God is making another covenant with Hagar this time. The language is the same. Remember for Abraham, it was offspring more than the dust of the earth and more than the stars of the sky.

[12 : 48] Here the language is descendants too numerous to count. However, it's clear that Hagar's descendants aren't the ones of covenant blessings. You can see that in verse 11.

The angel of the Lord 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 Hagar is a, sorry, Ishmael is a wild donkey of a man, which no doubt means he's fiercely independent and stubborn, like a donkey.

Probably incapable of working at all with anyone. Hence, there is hostility wherever he goes. Clearly, Ishmael is not Abram's son of promise and blessing.

But God is just being incredibly kind to Hagar. Abram and Sarah distrusted the Lord. It leads to misery for her. But there is God giving her an enormous family of her own.

[14:01] And in verse 13, have a look at verse 13. It tells us how to interpret the whole event. 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.

You see, we're told as Abram and Sarah meet, sorry, as Hagar and the Lord meet, in verse 7, that God found her. In verse 8, that he spoke to her.

God knew who she was. He says, Hagar, slave of Sarah. In verse 8, we see her concern, his concern for her, asking after her, where have you come from?

Where are you going? And in verse 11, her son is called Ishmael, which means God hears her. And here in verse 13, the author shows us what to make of it all, that God is the God who sees her.

[15:02] He's concerned for her. She's not the inheritor of covenant blessings, just someone caught up in the crossfire of the mess. But in God's kindness, he cares for her in her misery.

You see, the whole Bible is tightly focused around the promises to Abram, Isaac and Jacob. Promises that are eventually fulfilled and made bigger when King Jesus arrives.

And this passage shows us that even when his people distrust these huge promises, God is there picking up the pieces because of the misery and ruin relationships it causes.

And yes, God picks up the pieces for Hagar, but I'm not sure we can say that he will always do that. I'm not sure this passage has anything at all to say about pregnancy or IVF or anything like that.

I think that might be too people focused. Rather, Genesis 16 provides us with a snapshot of what God is like. He is gracious and kind for everyone caught up in the mess.

[16:14] And so, applying this to us today, this is our third point, let's see some examples of this. Does the end justify the means? And let's work through some examples as we finish.

And so, getting to heaven. Getting to heaven is a good end, perhaps the best of ends, I imagine. But what if we add, sorry, God's way is to trust in him alone to get there.

But what if we add some of our good works instead, such as church attendance? Silent retreats are all the rage at the moment in the Anglican circles.

What about pilgrimages to Israel? What is your score when it comes to keeping the Ten Commandments? God's end, my way, leads to misery.

As I damage myself and others with my religious law keeping. What about building the church? That's one of God's ends, to see the church built. God says his church is built through the preaching of the word.

[17:18] But what if we adopt other means, such as powerful music, charismatic experiences? Let's have cutting-edge cultural engagement. Does the end justify the means?

No. It leads to misery and mess as the church becomes a show and a performance that puffs up just select individuals. Evangelism.

What about that? Evangelism is trying to save our family and friends. A brilliant end for them. God's means is that we tell people the gospel of Jesus.

But what if we ignore God's way and use our own way? Let's change the message. Let's get rid of sin and judgments and all that negative stuff. Let's make it more attractive.

Why don't we make a gospel where everyone is saved regardless? Don't distrust God's way. It causes mess and ruin because people won't be saved at all.

[18 : 19] And finally, for us, attracting people to our church. Again, a really good end. But let's ignore God's means which is to be distinct in the world.

That is how the church attracts people by being distinct in the world. Why don't we try it our way? Let's try and be as relevant to our culture as possible. Maybe we could change our ethical stance on certain things.

Maybe we could be a church that is all about social and political engagement instead. I know. What if we make church all about us and what we can get out of it rather than service of the Lord and his people?

Does the end justify the means? No. It leads to misery as our church looks like every other organization in Melbourne. God's word to us today is don't distrust the Lord.

He's unbelievably kind and gracious, yes, but God's end our way leads to misery and mess along the journey. And so let's pray.

[19 : 26] Father God, we thank you for your word. Help us learn the lesson of Abram to trust you and not to distrust you. We're sorry, Father, for the subtle ways we depart from your means by adding our own ways to your good plans.

And Father, we're sorry for all the misery and mess that that has got us into. We're sorry for the innocent people who are caught up in the crossfire of our distrust.

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

In Jesus' name, Amen.