

Genesis 16

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Preacher: David Moser

[0 : 00] Let's pray. Lord, we ask that you would help us to delight in your word and to find our delight in you.

! That I am going to play a trick on you.

Okay? It's a little dangerous what I'm about to do, so I want to let you know that ahead of time, that I am going to lie to you. But by the end of the sermon, you'll see why.

Okay? So be on your guard. All right. That passage we just read, it is a tough story to hear, is it not? I hope it is.

I hope it affects you. I hope that it digs up things in your life, right? There's adultery. There's manipulation. There is jealousy. There is pride.

[1 : 05] There is abandonment. There is selfishness. The brokenness of our world is on full display in this passage. Now, for those of you who haven't been with us the past few weeks, as we have walked through Abram's story here.

This is Abram and Sarai, who will soon be renamed Abraham and Sarah, if those are names that ring a bit more familiar, a bell in your mind.

Abram has been called out at what we would consider to be like the end of his life. He's past retirement age. And the Lord said, I will bless you. And through you, I will bless the world.

They have no children. But he says, I will make of you a great nation. And through you, all the nations of the world will be blessed. They have been waiting for a long time.

About a decade at this point. And nothing has happened. So, they take things into their own hands, right? And I bet when some of you, when you hear this narrative, you see it through Sarai's eyes.

[2 : 18] I will probably fail on that and just call them Abraham and Sarah. Sorry about that. You might see it through her eyes, right? You might feel unfulfilled or desperate.

Desperate for a change. Or maybe you might feel a bit foolish, because I think she feels that in this passage. You might feel scorned like she does. Or maybe you'll see the text from Abram's eyes.

Perhaps waiting for something to happen. Come on, God. I really like something to happen here, right? Or perhaps agreeing to something that you know is really a bad plan.

Or maybe you feel like you're caught in the middle of two other people fighting, like I think he does in this passage. Or maybe you resonate with Hagar. Perhaps you feel like you don't have any power.

Feel like you have been used by someone else. Feeling repulsion towards that person. Wanting to get away. Or maybe you feel like Ishmael, who doesn't appear himself in this passage, but we already know something about him, don't we?

[3 : 33] Born, not yet, but he's going to be born into a storm that he did not, that he didn't start. And maybe you feel like you're similarly reacting to your lot in life.

No matter who you connect with, in this account, in Genesis chapter 16, you're hurting and you're causing hurt.

Right? No one in this passage here is unscathed. And no one is blameless. Each of them is sinned against.

Each of them is sinned against. And each of them sins against someone else. Don't they? And that's the story of your life.

And my life. Is it not? You live in a world where people hurt you. It might be out of malice. But oftentimes, like in this passage, people normally hurt others because they're just thinking about themselves.

[4 : 38] What they want. Their goals. And then we return the favor. Right? Either out of malice or by pursuing our own goals at the expense of somebody else.

And this chapter perfectly puts on display what we saw, if you were here with us this past summer, in James chapter 4. What causes quarrels and fights among you?

Is it not this? That your passions are at war within you. You desire and do not have. So you murder. You covet and cannot obtain.

So you fight and quarrel. See, this is the sin-stained world. That Abram and Sarai and Hagar and we live in.

Sin and suffering are what's wrong with the world. What's wrong with us. Right? And they are everywhere. Everywhere.

[5 : 41] But. This is not a message of despair and condemnation and despondency.

This isn't a message about hopelessness. The sky is not bleak. The night is not endless. The music is not all melancholy. Why?

Why? Do Abram and Sarai and Hagar and Ishmael, do they get their ducks in a row? Do they figure it all out? Do they just start treating each other a little bit better each day?

Do they man up and get over it? Do they figure out new techniques to fix their problems? No. Do they need any purpose? Do they need any purpose?

This isn't a hopeless story, because God inserts himself into the story. God's grace, not human ingenuity, is the defining factor in fixing what's wrong with the world.

[6 : 44] It's true of Genesis chapter 16 here today. Friends, it is true for us in our lives. Let me ask you, why are you tempted to sin?

Why am I tempted to sin? Why are we, Abram, Sarai, Hagar, anyone, why are we tempted to sin? Here in this passage, we see one of the most prominent reasons for temptation towards sin, and it's this, unmet hopes and expectations.

We see in verses 1 to 3 that both Abram and Sarai are operating out of their unmet hopes and expectations. It's probably a little bit different for each of them, right?

They each have a different perspective on what's going on. Abram's been waiting a decade for God to fulfill his promise to give him a son, so he's probably confused and impatient.

Anybody here today confused or impatient? On the other hand, Sarai is probably in a different place, right?

[7 : 51] You can hear her heart come out in her words. The Lord has prevented me from bearing children. She's in a tough spot, isn't she? The unmet desire for children is something that lots of people struggle with.

And it's dug down deep in her heart. She speaks almost as if, and this is reading into her words a little bit, but almost as if she feels sort of entitled to them.

The Lord has prevented me from bearing children. Have you ever felt a longing like that deep enough to start tearing at the fibers of your heart?

Perhaps let it morph into an entitlement in your heart? Be it children or anything else? So in Sarah's words, we hear a longing for family, but it's also a coded message for something else.

She's also longing for success. In her society, see, her society was family-centered to an extent that we really can't understand in our contemporary context.

[9 : 10] Her value was measured almost exclusively through childbearing. In a society that was family-centered to the utmost, having lots of kids meant having success in virtually every area of life.

It meant having lots of kids so you had a big tribe, so you had lots of security. You had respectability. You had prospects for wealth.

It was success in virtually every area of her life. Because she had had no children, she had no success and no value in other people's eyes.

Now, children might not be your definition of success, but I'm willing to bet that each of us has been tempted to let all those other things that kids would have gotten, Sarah, right?

Those security, respectability, prospects for wealth, success generally defined, all of those things, we have been tempted to let those things take the driver's seat in our lives.

[10 : 24] And that's what the Bible calls idolatry. There's one other thing in Sarah's plea here. Despair.

Right? She was well past the age when childbearing was possible. But as far back as Genesis chapter 12, God had promised that Abram would have a son, and through that son, the whole world would be blessed.

I love how one pastor put it. He said, see, this is worse than ever because now, but by having no children, I'm not just letting down my husband.

Now I'm not just letting down my people. Now I'm not just letting down my culture and their expectations. Now I'm letting down God. Now I'm letting down the whole world.

And so there's got to be a despair in her heart that I am just a failure and I am letting down all the people around me. Right? Maybe you feel like that today too. So we see these two people, confused and impatient Abram and lonely, unsuccessful, despairing Sarai.

[11:36] They stand as figureheads, I think, for so many of our troubles. How do we act when we stand on troubled footing like they did?

Well, we act a lot like they did. Sarai decides to use someone that she has power over to solve her problems. Right?

Instead of waiting for the Lord to fulfill his promise, Abram latches onto this concrete plan. See, it eliminates the uncertainty that he's feeling and it gives a realistic timeline to God's very fuzzy calendar.

But what's the cost of acting out of impatience? What's the cost of acting out of despair and a desire to become successful? It's high.

It's really high. Isn't it? Sarah takes Hagar, her handmaiden, over whom she has power and therefore has a responsibility to protect, and gives her to Abram as a second and a second tier wife.

[12:54] Right? She's still a slave. And what happens? Out of her despair and her desire for family, out of her desire for success, and out of Abram's confusion and out of his impatience, they actually undermine everything that they wanted.

They don't get what they want. They want family? They end up nearly destroying their family. They want success? They end up with a life of division.

They want clarity? They end up creating more confusion than ever before. They want a child? They end up dehumanizing Hagar. They want love and end up, look at verse 4, with contempt.

They want blessing and end up with trouble. Acting out of impatience, despair, ambition will ultimately give you exactly what you don't want.

I think you can see it clearly here, and I think if we are honest, we can look at our lives and say the same. What's at work here is a very simple idea.

[14:07] It's so simple that I think you're going to thank me a simpleton for having shared it with you. But I think it's really profound, and it really explains our whole lives.

It drives, essentially, the entire world. What's the idea? It comes in two parts. The first part is, everyone wants to be happy.

And paradoxically, this desire to be happy is responsible for essentially all human unhappiness. See, everyone wants to be happy.

Abram and Sarai were unhappy and wanted to escape it. When someone sees you as a rung on their ladder, you become a tool for their happiness.

Right? When you yell at someone, it's because something is standing between you and your happiness. Either they are, or something else is, and they just got in the way.

[15:08] Right? Right? And here's the second part. Everyone wants to be happy, but no one knows how. Abram and Sarah do this because they think it's going to make them happy.

They think this plan will make them happy, but they don't seem to consider Hagar's happiness.

People think that porn will make them happy. People think that looking down on someone else will make them happy.

People think that a purchase will make them happy. People think that a divorce will make them happy. People think that abusing someone else will make them happy. People think that a house, a car, a phone, anything will make them happy.

People think that lashing out, or using drugs, or indulging greed, or any other sin will make them happy. Does it?

Does it make them happy in Genesis 16? Does it make us happy? Pastor of the church I grew up in once said, do you want to be happy for a day?

[16:19] Go to Disney. Do you want to be happy for a month? Buy a car. Do you want to be happy for a year? Get married. Do you want to be happy forever?

Worship Jesus Christ. And that's the most important part. Everyone wants to be happy. And here's the thing. God wants us to be happy.

But He does not want us to be happy with sin. Because there is no lasting joy there. He doesn't want us to be, to find our fulfillment in things, because there is no lasting joy there. He wants us to be happy with Himself. The scriptures are full of this idea. There are many who say, Who will show us some good?

Lift up the light of Your face upon us, O Lord. You have put more joy in my heart than they have when their grain and wine abound. Or hear these words.

[17 : 24] But let all who take refuge in You, that's the Lord, rejoice. Let them sing for joy and spread Your protection over them, that those who love Your name may exult in You.

Or hear these words. Friends, that's where joy is found.

Everyone wants to be happy, but apart from God, no one knows how. Without Him, people do all sorts of things to either reduce the pain they currently have, or avoid the pain they think they're going to have, or try to produce some sort of enjoyment in the here and now.

The way we go about that ourselves only works on the surface. So we will always find it lacking. Always.

See, this passage is the ultimate the ends don't justify the means story, right? If you seek happiness through sinful means like Abram and Sarah, you will end up without it.

[18 : 51] And you will hurt others in the process. Sarah sins against God for suggesting that He needs her ingenuity. She sinned against her husband by suggesting polygamy.

She sinned against her servant by giving her to Abram and then later mistreating her. Abram sins against the Lord by distrusting her. He sinned against his wife by committing adultery.

He sinned against Hagar by taking advantage of her and then allowing Sarah to mistreat her. Hagar was sinned against greatly. She also sinned by allowing hatred to grow in her heart.

Everyone in this story has been broken by sin. They've sinned and they have been sinned against. Some more than others, obviously. But no one is unscathed and no one is innocent.

That's true of everyone in this room and everyone outside this room. Every time anyone tries to get what they want to achieve their goals, to be happy, on our terms, people get hurt.

[20 : 10] Either on purpose or because of thoughtlessness, right? A lot of hurt just happens because we don't think about other people. Everyone wants to be happy, but if you pursue happiness apart from God and His priorities and His ways, you will ultimately be unhappy.

And you'll harm others. And even good things like marriage or church growth or any good thing in this world, right?

They can all be twisted. All of them. We can put them on a pedestal and elevate them way too high and people will get hurt and we will feel crushing disappointment, right?

When our expectations aren't met. Marriage wasn't meant to be the ultimate thing in the world. And if you treat it like that, you will always be disappointed. even good things require that we follow God's clear instructions that He lays out in His Word.

So, to rid the world of sin and suffering, the things that are truly wrong with the world, with ourselves, we need to follow God's plan. We need to look hard at our own lives, what we're pursuing and how we're pursuing it.

[21 : 37] And we need to take a good look at God's Word, God's priorities and God's ways. We need to align our ways with His ways or we'll never know happiness. So, the answer to the problem then is do things God's way, right?

No. No. Here's the trick, right? Here's the lie.

What I just described to you is precisely not the solution. Does that surprise you? Does that surprise you?

What I just sold you was the religion of the Pharisees. What I just showed you was the heart of Islam.

What I just showed you is the heart of secular humanism. what we call legalistic Christianity. It had nothing to do with grace.

[22 : 48] A system of belief, be it religious or secular, that says, examine your life, examine the standard, and fix yourself. any system of belief that has that for its message, whether the standard is the Quran or the Bible or whatever standard you want, any system of belief that has that for its message stands against the gospel of Jesus Christ.

what is the solution to sin and suffering? What is it? It's not just follow God's rules.

It is not that. It's not just knock it off. It's not seclude yourself so that you don't get hurt and so that other people don't hurt you or that you don't hurt other people.

It's not tune it out and get over it. It's not any of those things. What breaks the power of sin and suffering? The answer isn't what.

The answer, of course, is who. At the end of verse 6, the situation has gotten so bad that Hagar has run away.

[24 : 08] This is an act of utter desperation. desperation. And I don't think we realize just how incredible it is an act of desperation. A solitary, pregnant, foreign woman was in all kinds of danger.

And who comes for her? Who comes for her? It's not Sarai, her mistress, who had a responsibility to care for her. It's not Abram, who took her as a wife and had a responsibility to care for her.

The angel of the Lord comes for her. If you look throughout the Old Testament, you'll see that the angel of the Lord isn't just God's representative.

The angel of the Lord is the Lord himself. Look at how Hagar responds to him in verse 13. So she called the name of the Lord who spoke to her.

You are a God of seeing. For she said, Truly, here I have seen him who looks after me. The Lord himself shows up. He gives grace.

[25 : 22] He comforts. He restores. When we are faced with the brokenness of our world, sin and suffering, that either we create or that we experience, when the world is broken because people are looking for happiness where it doesn't exist, and they're looking without regard on how they get it, what we need isn't better rules.

What we need is God. We need God to insert himself into our situation with his grace, just like he inserted himself here in Genesis 16.

And of course, he has inserted himself into our lives. In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God.

He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him and without him. Was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men.

the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. And here's where he inserts himself. And the word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

[26 : 53] For from his fullness we have all received grace upon grace. see, the Lord came and inserted himself into our lives, just like he made a promise to Hagar.

He promises something to us. In fact, he promised lots to us. Everyone who repents and believes, Jesus offers to nail our sin to his cross, where he made an end of it.

He rose to life so that we might live with him. He offers us a new heart of flesh with his law written on it. He offers us his own indwelling presence and power.

And there is the answer to sin and suffering. Can you and I abandon the pursuit of happiness in the wrong places?

Can we leave behind the search for happiness in wrong ways? Can that make our story look different than Genesis 16?

[28 : 09] Yes. Yes, we can, but you cannot do it on your own. So, I want to be absolutely clear here, because I did play a trick on you, right?

I want to be so clear. Do not hear from this message, your way is bad, so do it God's way, as if that's the whole message. Right?

We do actually need to do it God's way, otherwise there will always be sin and suffering. But, if that's the whole message, we've already lost. If that's the whole message, it's a message of slavery.

So, I mean, it is true that God's loving way works, and our selfish ways don't work. But you'll never have the heart, you'll never have the strength, you'll never have the desire, or the power, to actually follow God's way, without first being reconciled to Him, and without first walking in the newness of life that is found in Jesus Christ, and in no other name.

So, let's rewrite that script. We already said that to rid the world of sin and suffering, we need to follow God's plans, and that's absolutely true.

[29 : 28] We've already said we need to take a hard look at our own lives, what we're pursuing, and how we're pursuing it, and that's absolutely true. We've already said that these things are the entry point, walking forward in a way that looks different than Genesis 16, but when we said we need to align our ways with His ways, or we'll never know happiness, we missed the most important

part.

When we see the sinfulness and the brokenness of our own lives, especially when God's Word shows us where we're going wrong, the answer isn't just follow His rules better.

God's that's legalism. That's pull yourself up by your own bootstraps-ism. The law of God shows us our sin.

It certainly does. And it shows us our need for a Savior. That's the missing part. See, we have no hope of following Him until He saves us and we walk in newness of life.

So when the law shows us His perfection and our sinfulness, we need to run to Christ. Either the first time for salvation or the hundredth time to live in the power of His Spirit.

[31 : 01] God's law then becomes a rule of life for Christians but only after He has convicted you through His law, convicted you of sin and driven you to Himself in repentance and faith for forgiveness, for regeneration, those things that He wrought for us on His cross.

only then will, when God has made you clean and given you a new heart and given you His indwelling Spirit and you are actually walking in those things, only then can you have any hope of actually obeying.

Obeying the law in spirit and in truth. So Christianity is not Jesus punched your ticket to heaven, now behave.

That is not Christianity. If that's how you're living, you are not living in the power of the resurrection. You are not living in the power of the Holy Spirit.

You are not living in the power of the new man. Christianity is not that. Christianity is this. Galatians 5.16 Walk by the Spirit.

[32 : 24] Spirit. And then you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. You have to be walking by the Spirit first. Now we went to great pains a few weeks ago in Genesis chapters 1 and chapter 2, the creation accounts, to see this thing.

That we were made for covenant fellowship with the living God. that's what Paul calls walk by the Spirit. Then, and only then, we will not gratify the desires of the flesh.

And so, what does it mean to walk by the Spirit? That's the question. We need to be walking with God or else none of this matters. None of this can be real in our lives.

So, on its face, it simply means living with God day by day. Right? If you want, the book of Galatians is really short. You can read it in very short order.

It's like two or three pages in your Bible. Right? And it ends with that idea of walking in the Spirit. So, go today. Read that. Right? You can do that. Go ahead.

[33 : 36] You will see what it looks like to walk in the Spirit as he instructs us on word and prayer and fellowship with his people. And actually, that's what Christian theologians have called the means of grace for centuries.

Right? The things that the Lord has established for us to walk in so that we are rubbing up against him day by day. Things like prayer. Things like the Word. You know, daily hearing from the Word in your own life and sitting under the preached Word week by week.

It means being in fellowship among other believers. They may speak on the Lord's behalf into your life. It means attending carefully to the sacraments of the church.

Here's what that life looks like from Romans chapter 6. Thanks be to God that you who were once slaves of sin, and that's what it is to walk in any way but by the Spirit, being slaves to sin, have become obedient from the heart.

to the standard of teaching to which you were committed and having been set free from sin, having become slaves of righteousness.

[34 : 58] Christianity is not Jesus punched a ticket to heaven for you, so behave. Christianity is Jesus redeemed you and remade you.

Live life with Him and as you walk in His grace, He will guide your path. He will keep you from sin. He will comfort you in suffering and care for you all the days of your life.

Friends, let's pray. Lord, thank you that you have given us a good law, that your word is truth, that it shows us how life works, that it gives us a mirror through which to look at our own lives, to examine our own hearts, to see how we fall short, to see how we distance ourselves from you, see how we have hurt each other, have hurt you, have hurt ourselves with sin.

Lord, help us to not simply look at it as a checklist, to not look at it as something to simply try harder at without first looking to you.

So, Lord, if there are those here today who have never walked by the Spirit, who have never come to Christ in repentance and faith and known the forgiveness and new birth that he wrought for them on the cross, Lord, may they cry out to you.

[36 : 48] And, Father, for those who have walked by the Spirit but have let other things creep in and become too important, Lord, for those who have looked at your Word as dry and lifeless, who've seen the Christian life as a checklist, Lord, will you give us a new and powerful walk with you, that we might live walking by your Spirit so that we will have true joy, so that we will not gratify the desires of the flesh, so that we will, through your strength, conquer sin and suffering, so that you will be glorified in us.

We pray all these things in the name of Jesus Christ, our King. Amen.