

DOES THE END JUSTIFY THE MEANS?  
GENESIS 16

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

In the 1960s a professor at Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts, wrote a popular book. I used to visit the bookstore at the school, located near Harvard. The book which Professor Joseph Fletcher wrote was entitled *Situation Ethics*. (PROJECTOR ON--- SITUATION ETHICS) In it Professor Fletcher argued that the Law of Love is the rule which should govern our behavior in whatever situation we encounter in life. Love is the desired end of all of our actions, and whatever means are necessary ought to be used to reach that end. He writes, **“If the end doesn’t justify the means, what else does?”**

Our culture has largely bought into that philosophy. Professor Fletcher and the religious philosophy which he represents argue that love for women means respecting their right to control of their bodies. It is unloving to put women in circumstances that may lead to poverty and difficult family relationships. So love for women with unwanted pregnancies means that they should be able to kill babies in their wombs.

The Palestinians have been denied the right to have a country of their own. They face a situation of being subservient to the nation of Israel. Love for the Palestinians, according to this philosophy, means that they have a right to use whatever means which they have at their disposal to gain independence and statehood. So they are justified in killing civilians, taking hostages, burning families, and decapitating babies. For the end justifies the means. (PROJECTOR OFF)

We have been discussing the promises of God in recent weeks, in the context of God’s promises to Abraham and his descendants. One does not have to be a follower of the true God for very long before he discovers that trusting the promises of God often means waiting. Waiting is hard. We trust God’s promise to make Christians more like Jesus, and we pray accordingly. But when our husband or wife or kids don’t change according to our timetable, we try to make it happen. We use whatever means that we have at our disposal to make it happen--- because we really think that the end justifies the means. When the Lord appears to us to be too slow to act, we decide that we have to help Him out.

God promised Abraham that he would inherit the land of Canaan. When he got to Canaan, he found that it was occupied by other people. On top of that there was a drought which seemed to make the place uninhabitable. Abraham was forced to wait and trust God.

God promised Abraham that he would be the father of a great nation. But his wife had not been able to bear children. He had to wait. But the wait became lengthy. Abraham

and Sarah were getting well beyond the years of childbearing. So they decided that they needed to help out God. In Genesis #16 we see the consequences that can result from buying into the philosophy that the end justifies the means.

I.

First, in vv. 1-3 of #16 we find THE FORMULATION OF SARAH'S SCHEME. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. THE FORMULATION OF SARAH'S SCHEME) According to v. 1, **“Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. She had a female Egyptian servant whose name was Hagar.”** Abraham and Sarah have been in the land of Canaan for ten years now. They still have no children. Abraham is 85 and Sarah is 75. It was hard enough for a woman not to have any children in that culture. But there were also several hundred people in their clan who probably knew about the supposed promise of God that Abraham was to have lots of descendants. His actual name, Abram, meant “Exalted Father.” Sarah may well have felt like a failure. She had not helped him to be any kind of father.

After considerable reflection Sarah proposed a plan to Abraham. Verse 2 tells us: **“And Sarai said to Abram, ‘Behold now, the Lord has prevented me from bearing children. Go in to my servant; it may be that I shall obtain children by her.’ And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai.”** Wives often have good advice for their husbands. But here, as in the Garden of Eden, a wife proposes a plan contrary to the will of God. The husband, in both cases, bears responsibility for buying into it.

There were several things which were attractive about this plan. **First**, it was socially acceptable. Having kids was a primary purpose of marriage. It was a good end. The culture recognized that other means were necessitated when a woman was barren. Some years later the city-state of Nuzi (NUZI MAP) in the Tigris Euphrates River valley would make it part of their written law that a childless wife had to provide a maidservant for her husband to bear a child.

Two centuries after the time of Abraham Hammurabi in Babylon (BABYLON MAP) would codify this procedure. The son who resulted from the union of a wealthy man and his wife's maid could be declared the heir of the clan.

We have a marriage contract from about that same time from the ancient country of Assyria. (ASSYRIA ANCIENT) It reads like this: **“If within two years she [the wife] does not provide him [the husband] with offspring, she herself will purchase a slavewoman, and later on, after she will have produced a child by him, he may then dispose of her by sale wheresoever he pleases.”** (Pritchard, *ANE*, Vol. II, p. 72) Such is the Assyrian version of this custom. The discovery of these ancient customs lends support to the authenticity of our story in Genesis. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Besides being socially acceptable, Sarah's plan, **secondly**, had a good motive behind it. It was God's will that Abraham have a son. According to the record that we have in Genesis the promise had been made only to Abraham and not specifically to Sarah. Maybe it was not in God's plan for Sarah to be the mother of the promised child.

**Third**, Sarah's scheme, at least on the surface, was unselfish. It was a noble, heroic offer. Sarah was willing to give up the monogamous relationship that she had with her husband so that he might have a son and so that God's promise might be fulfilled. This plan of action might have passed through Abraham's mind before, but he might not have dared to mention it. No one else could have convinced him of it except his wife. How could he say "no" to such a generous offer? Perhaps Sarah's willingness to propose the plan was a sign of God's approval of it. This could be the means of fulfilling God's promise, and certainly it would fulfill his own heart's desire for a child.

So Abraham agreed to Sarah's scheme. Hagar was Egyptian. Probably she was part of the gifts given to Abraham when he was in Egypt. I doubt that the pharaoh would have given Abraham an unattractive woman. She certainly had to be considerably younger than Sarah. She was of child-bearing age. It all looked good.

But there is no evidence that Abraham checked with God. God's plan from the very beginning was that one man should live together with one woman. Last time we saw in #15 that God had made an unconditional covenant with Abraham guaranteeing that he would have lots of descendants. But it was hard to wait. So Abraham and Sarah bought into the philosophy that the end justifies the means. He acted apart from God's timing, God's method, and God's strength.

If it was hard to wait in Abraham's day, it is not any easier today. We live in an instant society. We have fast food, TV dinners, microwave ovens, and TV programs that solve major problems in 30 minutes or 60 minutes. If we stand in a checkout line for more than two minutes, we become impatient. Traffic slowdowns on the Las Vegas freeways drive us crazy. Is it any wonder that we have difficulty waiting for God to do only things that He can do?

The objective of Sarah's scheme was good. It was what God wanted and what He promised. God wants a solid relationship between a man and a woman. So what's wrong with making sure that a couple is physically compatible before making a commitment to marriage? God doesn't want me to be in debt. So what's wrong with working 60 or 70 hours a week, and what's wrong with stretching the truth a little bit on our taxes? God wants people to know him. So what's wrong with pressuring them to make a commitment and playing 20 verses of "Just As I Am" at the end of a church service? It is good that churches meet their financial obligations. So what's wrong with trying to guilt parishioners into giving more? It is perfectly appropriate to make a congregation aware of what a church's finances are, as Mac has done this morning. But godly churches don't guilt people into giving more. They trust God to work in people through His Holy Spirit.

What's wrong is that the end does not justify the means. The lesson from Abraham's life about faith is that we ought to expect great things from God, and there are some things-- not all things, but some things--- that we must wait for only God to accomplish and trust God only to accomplish.

## II.

(PROJECTOR ON--- II. THE SIDE EFFECTS OF SARAH'S SCHEME) In vv. 4-14 we learn about THE SIDE EFFECTS OF SARAH'S SCHEME. Buying into the philosophy that the end justifies the means often produces unexpected problems.

### A.

In vv. 4-6 we discover THE EFFECT ON THE FAMILY AND THE HOME. (II. A. THE EFFECT ON THE...) In a society where barrenness is seen as a disgrace and even a curse, it is perhaps not surprising that Sarah is lowered in the eyes of Hagar. According to v. 4, **“And he went in to Hagar, and she conceived. And when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress.”** Hagar is now carrying Abraham's child of promise, so it seems. Hagar has fulfilled Abraham's desires. She has seemingly fulfilled God's plan. Sarah is left behind.

So she is upset about the results. She says to Abraham in v. 5, **“May the wrong done to me be on you! I gave my servant to your embrace, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt. May the Lord judge between you and me!”** In v. 2 Sarah blamed God for her childless situation. Now she blames Abraham for the side effect of the plan which she proposed.

I was fascinated to discover in the Hebrew text that the word for “wrong” in v 5 is *chamas* (*CHAMAS*). In its use in the Old Testament it is variously translated as “wrong, violence, harsh treatment.” In Psalm 25 v. 19 David writes, **“Consider how many are my foes,/ and with what violent hatred [*chamas*] they hate me.”** The Arabic word “*hamas*” was intended to be an acronym for Islamic Resistance Movement. But it is also an Arabic word which looks very similar to our Hebrew word. It generally means in Arabic “zeal, enthusiasm.” The *hamas* of the Palestinians has become *chamas* to the Israelis. (PROJECTOR OFF)

In v. 6 Abraham feels compelled to cut off his relationship with Hagar. **“But Abram said to Sarai, ‘Behold, your servant is in your power; do to her as you please.’ Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she fled from her.”** The Code of Hammurabi (PROJECTOR ON--- CODE OF HAMMURABI), which reflected the prevailing custom throughout this Middle Eastern area, dealt specifically with the case of a maidservant who bore a child for the master and began to claim equality with the first wife. The law said that the master could have the maidservant put back into her former slave status. That is apparently what Abraham does here.

When Hagar resumes her status as a servant, the text says that Sarah mistreats her. The irony is that this lone Egyptian woman is being mistreated by the Hebrews. Four or five centuries later it will be Hagar's relatives who mistreat the descendants of Abraham.

### B.

In vv. 7-14 we learn about THE EFFECT ON GOD'S RESPONSE. (II. A. B. THE EFFECT ON GOD'S RESPONSE) God is gracious to Hagar. Sarah's plan--- agreed to

by Abraham--- has produced the unintended effect of broken relationships. Now in these verses we see that it has driven away this Egyptian woman who is carrying the product of her union with Abraham.

The impression that I get is that Hagar was a follower of the God of Abraham. Her name is a Hebrew name rather than an Egyptian name. It comes from a word that means "to flee." It seems probable that Abraham had obtained Hagar earlier when he was in Egypt. Perhaps she had been one of the gifts from Pharaoh. Some scholars have suggested that she got her name from their flight out of Egypt when Pharaoh kicked Abraham and his family out of the country.

Now Hagar is headed back to her homeland. On the way she encounters the angel of the Lord. In v. 13 the angel of the Lord is addressed as "God." The term "angel of the Lord" appears a number of times in the Old Testament. It is likely that the angel of the Lord is the Second Person of the Trinity, the Son of God, the pre-incarnate Christ. One scholar points out that this is the only instance in Ancient Near Eastern literature where the deity addresses a woman by name.

In v. 8 this angel of the Lord speaks to Hagar, saying, "**Hagar, servant of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?**" On one level this is a geography question. On a deeper level this is a spiritual question. It is the question that the Lord poses to us when we are straying from Him.

Notice what is implied by what He calls Hagar. Her proper position is as servant to Sarah. In the next verse He tells her to return to Sarah. It is through a relationship with the family of Abraham that people in the Old Testament experience the special blessing of God.

Then in vv. 10-12 Hagar receives three promises from God. **First**, God promises that He will produce from her a great nation. That nation we know today as the Arabs. The traditions of the Jews, the Christians, and the Arabs all agree that Arab ancestry is traced back to Hagar and her son.

**Second**, Hagar will bear a son who will be named "Ishmael," which means "God hears." The angel says that this is the name that he is to be given because God has heard her misery. This implies that Hagar has indeed been crying out to the true God. We know today from archaeological discoveries from Ebla in northern Syria that the name "Ishmael" was popular even two centuries before Abraham. This lends further support to the historicity and early authorship of this story.

The **third** promise that God gives to Hagar is found in v. 12: "**He shall be a wild donkey of a man,/ his hand against everyone/ and everyone's hand against him,/ and he shall dwell over against all his kinsmen.**" The technical name for this animal is "onager." (ONAGER) It is fast. It can run as fast as 40 miles per hour. It has also never been domesticated.

So it is that the Arabs over the years have acquired a reputation for a strong and independent spirit. (PROJECTOR OFF) One writer describes the Arabs as **“having a chip on the shoulder and a finger on the trigger.”** The strongest empires in history have had difficulty in subduing them. The Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Greeks, and the Romans all had problems when they tried to dominate the Arabs. Today we see the difficulty that Israel has in dealing with the Palestinian Arabs.

With much of our attention focused on the Middle East in recent weeks, we are reminded again that the world has always had difficulty in figuring out how to deal with the Arabs. The prophet Mohammed was an Arab. Osama bin Laden was an Arab. All but perhaps two of the 19 9/11 hijackers were Arabs. And then all of the recent Hamas terrorists were Arabs.

This conflict can be traced back to a well-intentioned scheme. Abraham and Sarah had a good end in mind. But they had a lack of faith. They didn't wait for God. They stepped outside of His timetable, His methods, and His strength. The end does not justify the means, partly because the intended outcome may not be the actual outcome.

In vv. 13 & 14 Hagar acknowledges the rare privilege that she has had to see a manifestation of God. She names the well where this happened “Beer Lahai Roi,” which has been variously translated. Some have suggested something to the effect: “The well of the One who sees me and lives,” which would reflect God's viewpoint. Others have suggested “The well of the Living One who sees me,” which would reflect Hagar's viewpoint. Perhaps both possibilities were divinely intended. Hagar has learned both that God sees and that God can be seen. All of this has happened to an Egyptian woman who is not directly related to Abraham or his descendants. God's grace extends beyond the people of the covenant.

III.

In vv. 15 & 16 we come to THE RESULTS OF SARAH'S SCHEME. (PROJECTOR ON-- III. THE RESULTS OF SARAH'S SCHEME) **“And Hagar bore Abram a son, and Abram called the name of his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. 16 Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram.”** Hagar evidently conveyed the divine message to Abram about Ishmael, including his name.

The faith of Abraham and Sarah in regard to the promised child, or children, had grown weak. They got tired of waiting. They bought into the philosophy that the end justifies the means. In the end their action became an opening for Satan to attack the Messianic line. The Evil One's goal is always to thwart God's plan and God's promises. In Genesis #4 he used Cain to kill Abel. In Genesis #6 we learned that his agents corrupted all of mankind except Noah and his family. Later Satan sought to destroy the promised line of Abraham. In the Book of Esther we see Haman try to wipe out the Jews. Centuries later Herod the Great is an instrument in Satan's hands as he kills all of the baby boys of Bethlehem to get at the baby Jesus. Closer to our era Hitler became the agent of Satan who also sought to wipe out the Chosen People. Now we here Palestinians and their

supporters in many parts of the world chanting, "From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free."

Satan is a destroyer and a counterfeiter. Hagar was an Egyptian. The Egyptians were descendants of Ham, who was the son of Canaan. In Genesis #9 v. 25 Noah cursed the descendants of Canaan. They were to be slaves of their brothers. Satan was trying to thwart God's plan by making the descendant of Canaan the son of the promise.

Satan sought to use Ishmael and his descendants as counterfeits. In Genesis #25 and #28 we learn that Ishmael had twelve sons and one daughter. The twelve sons became the heads of twelve tribes. It is no coincidence that we are told in the Scriptures that Jacob in the true line of promise had twelve sons and one daughter. His sons became leaders of the twelve tribes of Israel.

Eventually a supposed messiah arose among the descendants of Ishmael. His name was Mohammed. He set up a religion that claims to be the true faith. It is based on a holy book, the Qur'an, which claims to be the true revelation from the true God Allah. Later the followers of Mohammed would claim Mount Zion as the third holiest site in their religion. They built their Dome of the Rock (DOME OF THE ROCK) on the traditional site of the Jewish Temple. Satan is a counterfeiter. He used the lapse in faith in Abraham and Sarah to promote his own program. (PROJECTOR OFF)

This is not to say that individual Arabs are necessarily more sinful than any of the rest of us. There are many Arabs who identify themselves as followers of Christ. Up until about forty years ago the majority of the Arab residents of Bethlehem were Christians in some form. Still to this day there is a school in Bethlehem called Bethlehem Bible College, comprised almost entirely of Arabs. I have a seminary friend who sent his daughter there.

The end does not justify the means, even if it is a good end. Consequences of following this philosophy can be long lasting and severe. We need to trust God for the means as well as the ends. That often means that we have to wait for Him to work. It does not mean that we are to be irresponsible. It does not mean that we are to be disobedient to His revealed will. Christians have work to do. But we must place our faith in Him for only those things which He can do. Those things should be done in His timetable, with His methods, and in His strength.

Often that means waiting. For Abraham it meant waiting for God to miraculously provide a son. For Job it meant waiting for relief and an explanation for his suffering. For Joseph it meant enduring prison. For Moses it meant waiting until he was in his eighties before he could lead his people to freedom. For my family it has meant waiting for relief for our health challenges.

For William Carey it meant waiting for the right time to go to India. In January of 1793 he attended a meeting of the newly formed missionary society at which he heard Dr. Thomas speak about the need for missionaries and translators in India. William Carey

determined that he would join Dr. Thomas in going to India. He planned to leave in less than three months.

Meanwhile his wife Dolly was pregnant and expecting to deliver her baby in May. In William's mind Dr. Thomas would be along on the voyage, and everything would be fine. But when he explained his plan to Dolly, she replied to this effect: **"What a wild idea! How can you think of me going to India when I have a baby on the way? I will not go."**

In the 18th century men at times left their wives for extended periods. Such was the life of sailors and soldiers. So William decided that he would go to India and get established and come back for his family in three or four years. It seems to me that he was not patient to wait for the Lord's timing.

In early April of 1793 William set off with one of his sons and the Thomas family to go to India. As their ship sailed down the Thames River and into the sea, the sailors spotted a couple of French ships in the distance. The French were at war with the British. So the British captain decided that he needed to return to port to wait for a convoy to form. Back in port the captain was warned not to take passengers to India who did not have a permit from the East India Company. The missionaries did not have such a permit. The ship left without them.

Carey was disappointed, but it was seemingly the gracious working of God. Back at home Dolly gave birth to a son. Dr. Thomas later convinced Dolly that she should go to India with her husband. As time went by, she grew more receptive to the idea. Eventually they found a Danish ship that was going to a Danish colony in India. To go there the English missionaries did not need a permit from the East India Company. The timing was right. The methodology was better. Carey's wife and the rest of his family were going. They went in God's strength.

The Lord has given most of us lessons about waiting on God. Perhaps you are in the midst of one of those lessons. Sometimes there seems to be little else that we can do but wait and pray. Sometimes we think of things that we can do to help out God. What we need to be concerned about is whether those means are as legitimate as the ends. Joseph Fletcher's question was: If the end doesn't justify the means, what does? The answer is: God's Word. The means must be consistent with God's will revealed in the Bible. We are responsible to do things in God's timetable, with God's methods, and in God's strength.

Sarah seemed to be unable to bear children. Today one option available to some women who are seemingly unable to have children is in vitro fertilization. Eggs are taken from a woman and fertilized in a laboratory. Some of them are put back into the woman. But some usually are not. Sometimes the extras are put in storage. Sometimes they are discarded. Are these fertilized eggs merely innocuous blobs of protoplasm, or are they miniature human lives? Does the end justify the means? Are these little embryos suitable for experimentation in some scientist's laboratory with the possibility



that there could be better treatments that would result for hurting people? Does the end justify the means?

The means are as important to the Lord as the ends. That was the lesson that Abraham and Sarah learned in Genesis #16. That is the lesson that we need to learn in our day as well. The God of the ends is also the God of the means.

Expect great things from God. Attempt great things for God. The question is: Will we trust God for those things that only He can pull off, even if it means waiting a long time?