

DON'T TRY TO 'HELP' GOD

16 Now Sarai, Abram's wife, bore him no children; but she had a maidservant, an Egyptian, whose name was Hagar. ²And Sarai said to Abram, Listen, Jehovah has prevented me from bearing children; so I ask you, please go and sleep with my maidservant; it may be that I shall have children by her. And Abram agreed to what Sarai suggested.

³Now Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her maidservant—after Abram had been living for ten years in the land of Canaan—and gave her to Abram her husband to be his wife. ⁴And he slept with Hagar and she conceived. But when Hagar realized that she was pregnant, her mistress became despised in her eyes.

⁵Then Sarai said to Abram, You are responsible for the wrong I am suffering. I put my maidservant into your arms; and when she saw that she had become pregnant, she despised me. May Jehovah judge between me and you. ⁶But Abram said to Sarai, Look, your maidservant is in your hands; do to her whatever seems right to you. So Sarai treated Hagar harshly, and she fled from Sarai's presence. ⁷Then the angel of Jehovah found her by a spring of water in the wilderness—by the spring which is on the way to Shur. ⁸And he said, Hagar, Sarai's maidservant, from where have you come? And where are you going? And she said, I am fleeing from the presence of my mistress Sarai.

⁹And the angel of Jehovah said to her, Return to your mistress, and submit yourself to her. ¹⁰The angel added, I will so increase your descendants that they will be too numerous to count. ¹¹Furthermore the angel of Jehovah said to her, You are pregnant. You shall give birth to a son, and you shall name him Ishmael, because Jehovah has paid attention to your misery. ¹²He shall be like a wild donkey among men. His hand shall be against every one, and every one's hand against him; and he shall live in hostility against all his brothers.

¹³And she gave this name to Jehovah who spoke to her, You are a God who permits himself to be seen; for she said, Have I here looked upon him who sees me? ¹⁴Therefore that well was called Beer-lahai-roi, it is located between Kadesh and Bered.

¹⁵So Hagar bore Abram a son, and Abram named his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. ¹⁶Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram.

17 And when Abram was ninety-nine years old, Jehovah appeared to Abram and said to him, I am God Almighty, walk before me and be blameless. ²I will confirm my covenant between me and you, and I will multiply your offspring exceedingly. ³Then Abram fell on his face, and God spoke with him, saying, ⁴As for me, this is my covenant with you: you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. ⁵No longer shall your name be Abram, but from now on your name shall be Abraham; because I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. ⁶And I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make nations come from you, and kings shall come from your lineage. ⁷I will establish my covenant between me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. ⁸And I will give to you, and to your descendants after you, the land in which you are presently a sojourner—all the land of Canaan—for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God. ⁹Furthermore, God said to Abraham, As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you, and your descendants after you throughout their generations. ¹⁰This is [the sign of] my covenant that you shall keep—[the

covenant between] *me and you and your descendants after you: every male among you shall be circumcised.* ¹¹*You are to be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskin; this shall be the sign of the covenant between me and you.* ¹²*Every male in your household that is eight days old shall be circumcised—every male throughout your generations, including the one who is not your offspring, whether it be the one that is born in your household or the one that is purchased from any foreigner.* ¹³*Both he that is born in your household and he that is bought with your money must be circumcised. [The sign of] my covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant.* ¹⁴*The uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that man shall be cut off from his people, because he has broken my covenant.*

¹⁵*And God said to Abraham, As for Sarai, your wife, you shall no longer call her Sarai, but from now on her name shall be Sarah.* ¹⁶*I will bless her, and furthermore, I will give you a son by her. Indeed, I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of nations shall come from her.* ¹⁷*Then Abraham fell upon his face and laughed, and said in his heart, Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? And shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear children?* ¹⁸*And Abraham said to God, Oh that Ishmael might live before you!* ¹⁹*But God said, No; on the contrary, Sarah, your wife, shall bear a son to you, and you shall name him Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him.* ²⁰*And as for Ishmael, I have heard you: I have blessed him and I will make him fruitful, I will greatly increase his descendants—he shall be the father of twelve princes, and I will make of him a great nation.* ²¹*But my covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you next year at the appointed time.* ²²*Then God finished speaking with Abraham and went up from him.*

²³*Then Abraham took Ishmael his son, and all those who were born in his household, as well as all those who were purchased with his money—every male among the persons of Abraham’s household—and circumcised the flesh of their foreskin on that very same day, just as God had commanded him.* ²⁴*Now Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin.* ²⁵*And Ishmael his son was thirteen years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin.* ²⁶*On the very same day both Abraham and Ishmael his son were circumcised.* ²⁷*And all the men of his household, those born in the household and those purchased from a foreigner, were circumcised with him. (Gen. 16:1-17:27)*

Introduction

Have you ever been the recipient of unsolicited, undesired, and unhelpful “help?” Maybe one Saturday afternoon you are out in your garage just about to make some minor repairs on your car when your neighbor stops by to say hello. Although he doesn’t know the first thing about auto mechanics, he offers to “help.” You have the uneasy feeling that your minor auto repair is about to turn into a major headache.

Maybe at a family gathering you just happen to casually mention that during your week of vacation you’re going to add a deck to the back of your house. Your brother-in-law hears about your plan and insists that he is more than happy to “help.” Since

he doesn't know the first thing about carpentry, you sense that you are in for a long week and almost wish the boss would call you back to work for an emergency assignment.

Maybe you plan to put up the Christmas tree, but you didn't wait quite long enough for your little son to fall asleep. He hears the commotion downstairs and comes down all too eager to offer his "help." After several hours of sheer frustration, you are the one who falls asleep, collapsing on the sofa, while he puts the finishing touches on a lop-sided, precariously tottering Christmas tree.

Have you ever been the recipient of unsolicited, undesired, and unhelpful "help?"

There are times when we offer such "help" to God. When impatience and unbelief get the upper hand, we become tempted to "help" God fulfill His purposes. This is the message of Scripture: Don't try to "help" God by taking matters into your own hands, because the LORD neither needs nor desires such "help."

I. Don't Try to "Help" God, Only to Produce Unintended and Adverse Consequences

Ten years have passed since the LORD renewed His promise to Abram that he would have a son. Verse 3 informs us that the events recorded here took place *"after Abram had been living for ten years in the land of Canaan."* Now, through impatience and a sense of desperation, Sarai suggests to Abram a plan designed to "help" God fulfill His promises. Sarai suggests that Abram take her maidservant, Hagar the Egyptian, and seek to have a son by her; thus she gives Hagar to Abram to be his surrogate wife.

Abram acts upon Sarai's suggestion with mixed results. Hagar conceived and eventually bore a son. But Hagar now looks upon Sarai with contempt: Because the LORD enabled her to do what He had withheld from Sarai, Hagar no longer treats her mistress with respect.

These events bring about another series of unintended consequences. Sarai blames Abram for the attitude Hagar now exhibits (vs. 5.) Abram informs Sarai that Hagar is her maidservant and Sarai can do with her as she sees fit (vs. 6.)

Now follow yet another series of adverse and tragic circumstances. Because Hagar has treated Sarai with contempt, Sarai now proceeds to make life miserable for Hagar. When Hagar can't take any more, she flees into the wilderness—still carrying Abram's son.

Maybe it's for the best that Hagar left, a sad ending to an increasingly tense and frustrating and complicated relationship. Hagar does not respect Sarai, Sarai makes life miserable for Hagar, Sarai is Abram's wife, but Hagar will be the

mother of Abram's child. A sad ending to an intolerable situation; but the LORD did not allow it to be the end.

Would it not have been convenient if the LORD had just allowed Hagar to go? Hagar could have made a new life for herself and her child. Abram and Sarai could have gotten on with their lives. But the LORD didn't just let her go, He went after her and brought her back. The LORD instructs Hagar to return and submit to her mistress, Sarai.

The attitude of submission would do much to change Sarai's attitude towards Hagar, as we read in Proverbs 15:1,

A contrite answer [an answer that admits wrong and seeks mercy] *turns away wrath.* (Prov. 15:1.)

The LORD also informs Hagar that her son will be "*a wild donkey among men*" (vs. 12.) Far from being the promised son, Ishmael will be a rebel for most of his life.

Don't try to "help" God, only to produce unintended and adverse consequences. Note that the LORD does not just cause those consequences to disappear; rather, He expects us to deal with them in a godly way, (consider the LORD's instruction to Hagar.) Furthermore, He may allow us to live with them, even though they may be painful and unpleasant, (consider that Abram had to watch the life of Ishmael take its rebellious course.)

II. Don't Try to "Help" God, Because the LORD is Able and Determined to Do Things His Way

After another 13 years pass, the LORD again appears to Abram and once more renews His covenant promise. Abram was 86 years old when Ishmael was born (Gen. 16:16,) now he is 99 when the LORD appears to him (17:1) and renews these promises: "*I ... will multiply your offspring exceedingly*" (17:2); "*You shall be the father of a multitude of nations*" (17:4); "*I have made you the father of a multitude of nations*" (17:5.) Note, in verse 5 the past tense is used to emphasize the certainty of God's promises—God's promises are accomplished facts waiting to happen.

The LORD now changes Abram's name to bring it into conformity with the reality of his future identity—"*Abram*" (Exalted Father) is changed to "*Abraham*" (Father of a Multitude.) This change of name becomes a further pledge of God's commitment to fulfill His promise: He has given Abram his new name, and if He does not fulfill His promises, then the LORD's own name will be dishonored.

Now the LORD institutes for Abraham the sacrament of circumcision. The LORD first gave Abram *His Word* (Gen. 12:1-2,)

Then Jehovah said to Abram, Leave your country, and your people, and your father's household, and go to the land that I will show you. ²I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great; and you will be a blessing. (Gen. 12:1-2)

Next the LORD *established His covenant* with Abram (Gen. 15:9-11,17-18a,)

And he said to him, Bring me a three-year-old heifer, a three-year-old she-goat and a three-year-old ram, also a turtledove and a young pigeon. ¹⁰Abram brought all these to him, cut them in two, and arranged the halves opposite each other; the birds, however, he did not cut in half. ¹¹Then the birds of prey came down upon the carcasses, but Abram drove them away. ...¹⁷When the sun went down and it was dark, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between the pieces of the divided animal carcasses. ¹⁸On that day Jehovah made a covenant with Abram. (Gen. 15:9-11,17-18a)

Now the LORD adds the sign and seal of the covenant, *the sacrament of circumcision*: a tangible pledge and reminder of the covenant (vs. 11)—an assurance to Abraham and a “reminder” to God.

Not only will Abraham have a son, but the LORD re-affirms that his son will be born of Sarai (vs. 15-16.) To emphasize and confirm this purpose of God, the LORD changes Sarai's name to "*Sarah*" (meaning “Princess,” because “kings of nations shall come from her.”)

In response to these renewed covenant promises and signs at this late date in his life, Abraham fell on his face and laughed (vs. 17.) He thought to himself: How can this be? I'm almost 100 years old, Sarah is 90 years old, how can this now happen? Abraham suggests to God, "*Oh that Ishmael might live before You*" (vs. 18)—Abraham is requesting the LORD to choose Ishmael to be the covenant son. But God's reply is, "*No; on the contrary, Sarah, your wife, shall bear a son to you; and you shall name him Isaac*" (vs. 19.) The name "*Isaac*" (meaning “laughter”) would remind Abraham of his unbelief and of God's “unbelievable” ability to fulfill his promises.

Don't try to “help” God, because the LORD is able and determined to do things His way and in His time. When the fulfillment of the promise continued to tarry, Abraham's faith began to wilt. Consequently, Abraham began to reinterpret and redefine the fulfillment of the promise, lowering his expectation so as to allow for the divine promise to be fulfilled in the birth of Ishmael. But the LORD would not tolerate such a thing. He insists that the fulfillment will be just as He originally intended, and He revives Abraham's faith by refocusing it on the true and divinely intended fulfillment of the promise.

Thus the truth of Romans 4:18-21 (printed below,) must finally be attributed to the grace of God, not to the strength of Abraham:

[Despite all the obstacles standing] against hope, [Abraham] believed with hope, so that he might become a father of many nations, just as it had been spoken to him, So shall your offspring be. ¹⁹And without becoming weak in faith, he acknowledged that his own body was now as good as dead (he being about a hundred years old), and he acknowledged the barrenness of Sarah's womb. ²⁰Nevertheless, looking to the promise of God, he did not waver through unbelief, but grew strong through faith, thereby giving glory to God, ²¹being fully persuaded that what God had promised, he was also able to fulfill.
(Rom.4:18-21)

Conclusion

Let us not imitate Abram as we see him in his futile efforts to “help” God, only to produce unintended and adverse circumstances, which the LORD would not allow to “just go away.”

On the contrary, let us imitate Abraham as we meet him at the conclusion of this present passage of Scripture. After God made clear His determination to do things His way without any unsolicited “help” from Abraham, Abraham immediately proceeded to carry out the LORD’s instructions to circumcise his entire household (vs. 22-27); doing so *“on the very same day, just as God had commanded him”* (vs. 23.)

Let us not try to “help” God, rather, let us only trust and obey Him.