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WHY WE HAVE FAMILY PROBLEMS

Genesis 16:1-6

By

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Genesis Lesson 33

Why We Have Family Problems Genesis 16:1-6

There are few joys in this life that compare to a harmonious family life. The late Dr. M. R. De Haan said, "The nearest thing to heaven on earth is a happy Christian home." At the same time, few things in this world are as stressful as a home filled with strife. Solomon, with his 1,000 wives and concubines, must have known what he was talking about when he wrote, "It is better to live in a corner of the roof than in a house shared with a contentious woman" (Prov. 25:24).

Of course, no home is going to be free of all conflict this side of heaven. We all struggle with the flesh. When self-centered sinners live in close contact with one another, conflict is inevitable. Children in even the best of Christian homes will fight. Christian husbands and wives will have misunderstandings, disagreements, and hurt feelings. We should not expect perfection. But at the same time, a home that follows God's plan for the family can be such a joyous, warm, loving experience that we can agree with Dr. De Haan that it's the nearest thing to heaven on earth.

Is your home like that? If you must admit that it falls short, take heart! So did Abram's home. There was strife in his home because he and Sarai went along with some cultural customs regarding the family and violated some of God's principles. The conflict continues even to this day between Abram's descendants through Ishmael (the Arabs) and Isaac (the Jews). But by learning from Abram's mistakes, we can avoid the problems he fell into and repair the damage in our families. The incident recorded in Genesis 16:1-6 teaches us that ...

We have family problems when we go along with wrong cultural customs rather than follow God's plan.

In every culture there are some elements that are favorable to family life, some that are neutral, and some that are harmful. As God's people, if we want to have harmonious families, we must

think biblically about our culture, and resist those customs that are adverse to God's plan for the family. I want to focus on three lessons:

1. Our culture puts pressure on families to violate God's Word.

The pressure on families is greater now than at any other time in history because of the modern mass media that bombard us with ideas and examples that erode the family structure: "Illicit sex is exciting; in fact, it's not really illicit. It's O.K. And everybody does it!" Or, "Nobody stays committed to a troubled marriage. You deserve some happiness. Besides, it's better for the kids to live with one parent than to live in a house filled with constant arguing. Bail out!" Or, "Happiness comes from financial success. Both husband and wife need a career to be fulfilled and to get ahead financially. Your career comes first."

Bruce Wilkinson of Walk Thru the Bible Ministries observes, *"The church, reflecting trends in society, no longer takes marriage as seriously as God does!"* (Promotional letter, italics his.) He quotes a law professor who points out that it's easier in this country to walk away from a marriage than from a commitment to buy a used car. Most contracts can't be unilaterally abrogated, but marriages "can be terminated by practically anyone at any time, and without cause." And even Christians are bailing out by the thousands.

In Abram and Sarai's day, the cultural pressures were perhaps not as pervasive as they are now, but they were still powerful. Like fish who don't realize they're wet, we all tend to be so immersed in our culture that we don't realize how much it affects us. In their culture, there was a strong pressure to have children, especially sons. Sons guaranteed that your family name would be carried on. Sons showed that you were prosperous and blessed. To be childless was a mark of reproach. This stigma was so strong that if a wife could not produce children, the custom was for her to give one of her servant girls to her husband as a concubine. The children of that union became the children of the wife.

In Abram's case, the pressure to have a son was increased by two factors. The first was his name, which meant, "father of many," or "exalted father." In chapter 17, God gives him a new

name, Abraham, "father of a multitude." You can imagine how Abram must have felt when a band of traders passed by his tents. "What is your name?" they would ask. "Abram," he replied. "That's wonderful," they would respond, "how many children do you have?" "None." "None?" They would hold back the laughter as they glanced at one another. "But," Abram would add, "God has promised to give me a son and make me the father of a great nation." Right!

The second reason Abram felt pressure to have a son was God's repeated promise to give him a son. And yet he was now 85, Sarai was 75, and even with the longer life spans in that day, they were getting close to that age when it becomes physically impossible to reproduce. If God was going to come through, it seemed that it had to be soon.

It was in that context that Sarai came up with her plan in accordance with the custom of the day to give Abram her maid (16:2). Perhaps the thought had crossed Abram's mind before and he had dismissed it, not wanting to threaten Sarai. But now it was coming from her. Besides, Hagar was an attractive, younger woman. She was most likely part of the dowry which Pharaoh had given Abram for Sarai when they had gone down to Egypt (Gen. 12:16). So Abram's past sin of going down to Egypt and trying to pawn off Sarai as his sister comes back to haunt him in a different form. He yielded to this culturally acceptable custom, went in to Hagar, and she became pregnant with his child. I draw three lessons from this part of the story:

(1) The greatest temptations often come from those who are closest to us. I can't say for certain, but my guess is that if Abram's friend, Mamre, had suggested this, Abram would have resisted the idea. But when Sarai suggested it, he was vulnerable. That's the way we're made. We're most influenced by those we are closest to emotionally. Satan got to Adam when he listened to his wife (Gen. 3:17). The same phrase here (16:2) warns us that we need to be on guard not to be wrongly influenced by those closest to us and not to tempt those closest to us. The temptation to cool your zeal for the Lord will most likely come from a lukewarm mate. Be on guard (Luke 14:26)!

(2) *Right motives are not enough; we need right methods.* Both Abram and Sarai had pure motives. They wanted to bring about God's will by producing the heir God had promised. They wanted to help God out. Their motives were right; but their method was wrong. In God's work, methods are often just as important as the results. The ultimate question is not the bottom line, the results. It is rather, how did you get there? Did the result come from dependence upon God or was it produced by the flesh? Is God the source, or is fallen human nature?

This is a special problem for us, because Americans are a pragmatic people. If it works, it must be right. After all, look at the results! "These methods are proven to build your church!" But notice that Abram got the intended results with Hagar. He got a son. But it wasn't from the Lord, and it created all sorts of problems in the short and long run. Right motives must be accompanied by right methods.

(3) *Right methods involve seeking the Lord, not using culturally acceptable means to escape our problems.* When Sarai said, "... the Lord has prevented me" (16:2), it should have set off warning lights. If the Lord has prevented you, then it's wrong to try an end run to get by other means what He has prevented you. When the Lord has shut you up to some trial, be careful of removing it through your schemes. It is permissible to work to alleviate the problem if you truly seek the Lord in the process, submitting to His sovereign hand. But if you resort to human solutions that leave God out or just give God polite recognition in passing, you're in trouble.

Sometimes people ask why I am against the various 12 Step programs. They mention a Higher Power, and they seem to help people. My problem with them is that no matter who or what your Higher Power is, the programs still work. If any Higher Power will do, even if you call it God, then the Higher Power is not essential to the process. Also, the programs have a selfish focus. Their goal is to help people overcome their problems so they can be happy, not to deal with their sins so that they can learn to please and glorify God. So even though the programs often "work," the results come from the flesh, not from God's Spirit. Right methods involve seeking the Lord and depending on Him.

So we'll have family problems when we yield to wrong cultural customs instead of following God's plan. And our culture puts pressure on our families to violate God's Word.

2. Pressure coupled with passivity leads to problems.

One of the greatest problems in American marriages is the passive male. By passive, I mean not assuming responsibility for the spiritual direction of the marriage and family. The man dumps it on his wife, buries himself in his job, and tells himself that he is being responsible by providing financially.

But it's not just an American phenomenon. It was a problem 4,000 years ago. In chapter 15, we find Abram listening to the word of the Lord (15:1, 4); but in chapter 16, he listens to the voice of Sarai (16:2). Abram passively goes along with Sarai's suggestion, and then, when problems result, he tells her to do whatever she thinks is right (16:6). But he didn't deal with it himself. He allowed Sarai to mistreat Hagar, who was now also his wife, when he should have protected her.

I'm not implying that it's always wrong to listen to your wife. Often that is the smartest thing a husband can do! God has given us our wives to give us wisdom and insight which we often lack. The problem isn't listening to your wife; the problem is abdicating spiritual leadership if your wife suggests something that isn't from the Lord.

God is strangely absent from verses 1-6. He is given the credit (or blame) for preventing Sarai from conceiving, and His name is invoked to justify her point of view (16:5). But He is never sought. Abram didn't bother to ask the Lord whether this crucial decision, which would affect the rest of his life and the rest of human history, was God's will.

Please observe that the Lord didn't stop Abram from doing this. All He would have had to do was say, "Abram, don't do it!" But God was silent. In fact, the biblical record indicates that God didn't talk to Abram again for 13 years (compare 16:16 with 17:1). Why didn't God stop Abram? The only answer I know is that Abram didn't bother to ask the Lord for His counsel. God won't step in and prevent His children from making some serious mistakes if they don't seek Him.

Sometimes I hear someone say, "I'm going to go ahead with this action and if God wants to stop me, He can." Or I've heard, "I'm going to marry this non-Christian because I've prayed about it and feel a peace about it." You don't need to pray about it! God has clearly forbidden it in His Word. If you pray about it, you're sinning, because you're asking God to change His holy standards. God isn't impressed with your prayers unless your heart is ready to obey, and then He will reveal what we should do. But He won't necessarily stop us if we don't seek Him with an obedient heart.

These verses are so true to life. First a wife pressures her passive husband into a scheme to alleviate her embarrassment in the eyes of society. He goes along with things and she gets what she wanted. But it doesn't satisfy her, so she blames him for the problems. (Verse 5: "May the wrong done me be upon you" has the nuance of, "It's your fault!" The NIV reads, "You are responsible for the wrong I am suffering.") Rather than taking responsibility at this point, Abram responds, "Do whatever you want, dear." He was acting like a wimp, not a patriarch!

What a nagging wife really wants from her husband is usually not the thing she's nagging about. She wants her husband to take the loving leadership in the home God intended him to take. But so many Christian husbands are just like Abram here. He wants peace, and so he abdicates spiritual leadership to avoid further conflict. But it just frustrates his wife. She wants her husband to be the loving, responsible leader in the home. If he doesn't know what to do, he can at least admit it and say, "Let's search the Scriptures and seek the mind of the Lord on this matter." And then he can lead her in doing that.

Notice the problems which resulted from Abram's passivity: There was *competition* between Sarai and Hagar. Common sense could have predicted that. Every time you see polygamy in the Bible, you've got problems. God's design was for one man and one woman to be together for life. It is impossible for a man (or woman) to be sexually involved with another partner without it causing severe problems of jealousy and competition.

Also, it led to *false pride* on Hagar's part. She now boasted that she was better than Sarai. It led to *conflict* between Abram and Sarai. She *blamed* him for the situation: "You're the one who wanted a

son so bad! I was just trying to help you out, and look what it got me!" It led to *false spirituality* on Sarai's part, as she piously claimed, "May the Lord judge between you and me." In other words, "I'm in the right; God is on my side." It led to Sarai *mistreating* Hagar. While Hagar was not without her own sin in the situation, she is the victim of the scheme. She really had no choice but to go to bed with her master, and then she got caught in the cross fire. Then, of course, Ishmael resulted from Abram's passivity in going along with Sarai's scheme. And his descendants have plagued the descendants of Isaac ever since.

These verses teach us that we should *not give in to expedience*, even if we have the right motives and are seeking a godly goal. If you give in to expedience, you never get what you were after. Sarai thought she would gain a son by Hagar, a son who would fulfill God's promise. Instead, she gained contempt for Hagar and conflict with Abram. Suddenly Sarai was the outsider in her own home.

Also, *be careful when you're trying to escape pressure*. God often allows pressure to drive us to greater trust in Him. He can remove the source of the pressure when we have learned to trust Him. If you bail out of your marriage because you're unhappy, you may find immediate relief, but you and your children will reap long-term painful consequences because you have violated God's principle of lifelong marriage. If as a husband you take the easy way toward peace by saying, "Whatever you want, dear," rather than by sensitively leading your wife to work through things in a godly manner, you may get quick peace but long-term conflict. The main thing is to wait on the Lord and actively seek Him in every family problem.

So we've seen that our culture puts pressure on our families, and that pressure, coupled with passivity, leads to problems.

3. Following God's plan for the family is the way to resist cultural pressure.

Abram told Sarai to do to Hagar what was good in Sarai's sight (15:6). Bad counsel! He should have told her to do what was good *in the Lord's sight*. The Bible gives us God's blueprint for the family. The main goal of the Bible is to teach us how to love God and one another (Matt. 22:37-40). We don't need to turn to worldly wisdom (which has flooded into the church through psychology) to

learn how to get along in our families. At the heart of most psychological counsel is that you need to learn to love yourself and boost your self esteem. At the heart of God's counsel is that you need to learn to deny yourself and boost your esteem for others. Invariably, when there is conflict in the home, it is because one or both partners are failing in personal devotion toward God and they are failing to apply God's principles for loving one another.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, let me list four action points suggested by this text.

1. *Shift your focus from seeking personal fulfillment and happiness to seeking to please and glorify God.* Christians have gotten caught up in our cultural pursuit of personal fulfillment and happiness. We've fallen into the trap of using God and the Bible to make us happy. But if it doesn't seem to be delivering the goods, then we bail out of our marriages or seek fulfillment in worldly pleasures, rather than submitting ourselves to God's purpose for our personal and family lives. If you are unhappy in your marriage, the reason you should seek counsel is not so that you can become happy. You need to get help because a marriage marked by conflict does not please and glorify God. That should be your focus.

2. *You cannot please and glorify God apart from saturating yourself with His Word.* If you do not know God's Word, you will simply be swept downstream with the powerful currents of our culture. As much as you need to eat to stay healthy, so you need to feed daily on God's Word. Read it, memorize key verses, meditate on it, and seek to obey it. Psalm 1 promises blessing to the one who does not walk in the counsel of the ungodly, but who delights in God's Word.

3. *Strive to become a biblical thinker who challenges our culture with God's Word, especially in family matters.* Why should career success be your main goal in life? Why does your family need all the latest junk, instead of giving generously to God's work? Why should your TV set be on for several hours every evening? Why should you run your schedule at a frenzied level like everybody else? How can your family develop a ministry mind-set? Become a biblical thinker!

4. *Husbands need to assume loving leadership in the home and wives need to let them to take it.* I'm not talking about becoming an Archie Bunker, who barks commands at his cowering wife and kids. That's *not* biblical leadership! I am talking about leading by example from the strength of a growing, personal walk with God. The main job description for a husband is to love his wife sacrificially as Christ loved the church and gave Himself for her (Eph. 5:25). That means never acting selfishly, but always for the ultimate good of your family. If a husband focuses on his God-ordained responsibility out of a desire to glorify God and the wife on hers, there will not be competition, but complementarity. Husbands should learn to practice the servant leadership exemplified by the Lord Jesus. Husbands should always remember that an exhaustive study of police records has shown that no woman has ever shot her husband while he was doing the dishes (*Reader's Digest* [11/79])!

If we follow wrong cultural customs rather than God's plan, we'll have family problems. But, if we'll focus on pleasing and glorifying God by obedience to His Word, if we learn to think biblically and lead lovingly by example in our homes, we'll avoid many family problems and begin to experience a little bit of heaven on earth.

Discussion Questions

1. What are some pressures which our culture puts on the family that didn't exist 100 years ago?
2. Why is passivity among American men so common? What can Christian husbands and wives do about it?
3. What are some ungodly American values and customs we need to challenge? What adverse affects do they have on the family?
4. What do the biblical headship of the husband and submission of the wife mean practically? Are these roles valid for today?

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