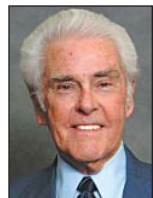


Redeemed from poor choices

Have you ever had a decision to be made that seemed absolutely impossible for you in your particular



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circumstances? If so, you can understand Abram's dilemma when he entered into conversation with God. Abram wanted to have a son with his wife Sarai, but he was about 86 years old and Sarai was only a few years less. When he approached God with his request, God promised an answer.

In spite of its difficulty, trust what God tells you (Gen. 15:1-6).

As you can see from the text, at this time in Hebrew history, the biblical writer describes communication between God and man in language that Abram would understand. In this situation, God spoke through a vision or dream (15:1).

Abram reproached God for allowing him and Sarai to be childless into their senior years when a pregnancy seemed totally impossible. But God responded by telling him that "a son coming from your own body will be your heir." Then God took Abram outside his tent to view the star-studded sky. God told Abram, even though you can't count the multitude of stars, ultimately you will have children enough to create a virtually uncountable family.

It appears obvious that Abram was having some fear and anxiety about his situation since God says, "Don't be afraid, Abram, I am your shield." In his study of Genesis, Ralph Elliott points out that "it is possible to understand when one realizes that as yet Abram has no full-blooded Semitic ancestors. This in itself is something of a shame for a Hebrew. It represents a certain failure on the part of the marriage relationship and, of course, a certain failure in the covenant relationship" (The Message of Genesis, p. 118).

After examining the stars in the sky, Abram's response seems

incredible due to the impossibility of having a son by natural childbirth, but "Abram believed the Lord and he [God] credited it to him as righteousness." This response includes a covenant term. "Righteousness describes what is correct to and within a clan by a member of that clan.... The righteousness of an Israelite is his behavior appropriate to his membership of the covenant community" (G. Henton Davies, "Genesis," The Broadman Bible Commentary, Vol. 1, p. 178).

Don't choose your own plan in spite of God's promise (Gen. 16:1-5). Since God had not fulfilled his promise for ten years, Abram's wife Sarai set up her own plan. She told Abram to take her handmaiden Hagar and sleep with her. From her pregnancy they could at least have a son as part of Abram's family since he would be the father.

Abram agreed with her plan and impregnated Hagar. Then the results of taking matters into their own hands became obvious. As soon as Hagar knew that she was pregnant, "she began to despise her mistress." But Sarai then reacted by blaming Abram for Hagar's pregnancy including the way that Hagar was treating her. "You are responsible for the way I am suffering," she complained to Abram.

As can happen in contemporary marriages when the couple reject God's plan for their lives, the couple blame each other when things go wrong. They blame each other for the failure of their adopted plans. Since so many years had gone by with no fulfillment from God of his promise for a son from Abram's body, Abram was faced with some questions. When do I wait on God and when do I act on my own? Do I go until God says stop or do I continue to wait until he says go?

Refocus on God's plan for their future (Gen. 17:15-19). By this time several actions were focused on the couple. Abram's name was changed to

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17:18-19

Abraham, all males in the household were to be circumcised to certify the covenant relationship, Sarai's name was changed to Sarah, and God's plan for a son was renewed. Also Ishmael, the child born to Hagar, would be rewarded by God but the to-be-born son whose name would be Isaac would be the covenant child. The whole family was being commissioned to follow God's will for them.

If we move away from the Old Testament story to consider God's plan for our New Testament lives, the challenge is reflecting on how to determine the will of God and then commit ourselves to it. The book by a former colleague at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary offers some helpful approaches to this task. "Doing the will of God is a sacred act in living. It includes right thinking but goes beyond thought to action born of a right heart.... Obedience in Christian practice is an act of a clear mind and a pure heart" (Morris Ashcraft, The Will of God, p. 133).

Ashcraft suggests several elements of the search for God's will and plan for Christians in the community: knowing your beliefs, knowing your Bible, engaging in prayer and worship to hear God's voice and conversing with other serious believers. The heart of the search is to relate God's will, our will, and my will into a livable pattern. When you renew your commitment, leave an opportunity for the providence of God in determining actions. Doubts will arise, as they did for Abram, so Ashcraft tells us that "many times in my journey with the will of God I have not been able to see the way clearly." But keep open to the new directions that God through his Holy Spirit will give you in your search.

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