

Confronted By God's Will  
Genesis 16

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There's a story about 12th century friar Francis of Assisi that has been told over the years, describing a time when he was hoeing his garden and he was asked, "*What would you do if you were suddenly told you would die at sunset today?*" According to the story, Francis replied, "*I would finish hoeing my garden.*" The implication was that he was confident that hoeing the garden was God's will for him.

How strongly do you feel that you know God's will for you today?

For sure, all of us have wondered, "What is the will of God for my life?" But also, we have been hostile toward His will for us when we knew what it was. Haven't you faced a time when God's will didn't match your plans? It's not abnormal to know what God wants you to do, or what He has for you, or what He is calling you to, yet you would rather avoid it or change it. That only reveals the natural hostility we have towards God.

But God sent Jesus Christ to remove that hostility.

Jesus not only paid the penalty for our opposition to God's will, but He made it possible for our lives to be aligned with His will. We should trust Jesus to remove the hostility and align us with God's will. But how do we recognize the will of God for our lives?

Reformed theologians generally differentiate between two wills of God presented in Scripture. You might say two kinds of will. We call these God's will of precept and His will of decree. Put differently, God's preceptive will and His decretive will. If you've never heard God's will described in this way, that's ok. Many people have not. But you can find an outline at the bottom of page 6 in the WG to help clarify.

God's preceptive will consists of His precepts (or commands) which we must obey, and God's decretive will consists of all He decrees (or sovereignly ordains) to come to pass.

Throughout history, God's people have been confronted by these two wills of God. Genesis 16 provides just one example, and it shows that we cannot be aligned with God's will without His divine help. So let's look at this together.

In Genesis 15, God further clarified His covenant with Abram, promises of descendants and of a place where God would dwell with those descendants. Two Sundays ago we saw the ancient ceremony in which God committed to keep both sides of the covenant between Abram and Himself. God spoke to Abram and confirmed that his ancestors would take possession of the land and that God would give him a biological son.

But in this chapter, 10 years have passed, and Abram and his wife Sarai still have not conceived. Ten years of waiting. And Sarai grew restless, notice verse 1 again, "*Now Sarai,*

*Abram's wife, had borne him no children. She had a female Egyptian servant whose name was Hagar. Moses wrote these things down many generations after the events occurred, after the Israelites, the descendants of Abram and Sarai, were delivered from slavery in Egypt.*

It was not coincidental that Hagar was an Egyptian and that Sarai put her hope in this woman, because as God commanded the Israelites to wait before entering the Promised Land, they began to look back toward Egypt. They transferred hope from God to Egypt.

What Sarai does here is comparable. There was a lesson for the Israelites, and for us, a lesson for moving forward with God by faith or going back without Him by sight.

Now, Sarai knew the precepts of God regarding marriage. God established marriage between one man and one woman in the beginning. There were to be no others invited into that relationship. But notice what she does, verse 2, *"And Sarai said to Abram, 'Behold now, the LORD has prevented me from bearing children.'*" Her words reveal that she feels God is against her, that He is keeping her from what she wants, that He is depriving her.

She had a sense of God's promise of the child, but she is despairing and desperate, and so she devises her own method, her own plan to fulfill God's promise. She says to Abram, *"Go in to my servant; it may be that I shall obtain children by her."* The Hebrew states that Sarai says, *"I may build through her,"* as in, build a family.

Sarai understood the will of God, that she was to be a mother according to the promise of God. But it was not happening. Where is the child? All this time, and she has no child. But what does she have? She has God's Word. She has His truth; she has His precepts. She knows God's will.

Now, Abram could be the sound voice of faith here. But he isn't. He is passive, and it's not incorrect to see a strong resemblance between this account in Genesis 16 and the fall of man into sin in Genesis 3. In both cases, the husband fails to lead the wife with faith. The end of verse 2 says, *"Abram listened to the voice of Sarai."* In Genesis 3, when God reveals Adam's punishment, He begins by saying, *"because you have listened to the voice of your wife."*

It is biblical and smart to listen to the voice of a wise and godly voice. Proverbs 19 describes the blessing of *"a prudent wife,"* a wise wife. She is from the Lord. Husbands should listen to their wives; but in circumstances where the wife is struggling in faith, the husband must shield and lead the wife.

Husbands and wives must help each other obey God's will. Ecclesiastes 4 says, *"Two are better than one...if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up!"* That *"lifting up"* does not happened with Abram and Sarai, verse [3] *So, after Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her servant, and gave her to Abram her husband as a wife. [4] And he went in to Hagar, and she conceived.*

Abram embarks on polygamy. He takes another “wife;” although, by definition, what he has with Hagar would not be a true marriage. Marriage is between one man and one woman. A polygamous marriage is not really a marriage. John Calvin points out that this union is somewhere between fornication and marriage.

And a harmful outcome occurs quickly. Hagar conceives and quickly behaves in a haughty way toward Sarai, apparently looking scornfully on her because she could not conceive. Sarai returns the dishonor.

All Sarai’s plan accomplished was the creation of strife in the household of Abram. There are no innocent parties. Each person sins; each one violates the commands of God, but notice that these are not commands written on a tablet of stone, but rather, they are written on the tablet of the human heart.

Maybe you’ve heard the old joke about the man who went to his doctor and said, *“Doc, I’ve been doing wrong, and my conscience is troubling me.”* The doctor nodded and said, *“Ok, so you want something that will strengthen your willpower?”* The man replied, *“No Doc! I need something that will weaken my conscience.”*

In Romans 2, the apostle Paul explains that there are basics of right and wrong that all people know because God has installed a conscience within each person, a moral compass in the core of a person. This is why no human can legitimately plead “not guilty” before God. All have sinned and fall short of His glory. And God has further revealed His moral law through His Word. These make up the revelation of His preceptive will.

God’s preceptive will consists of His precepts (or commands) which we must obey. As we ponder God’s will for our lives, we must do so in light of His will revealed in His Word.

He tells us that we must walk by faith, trusting Him.

That we must follow His ways.

That we should humble ourselves.

That we should love our neighbor.

That we should reject sinful impulses.

That we should admit our guilt before Him.

That we should rest in His salvation.

That we should look to Him for every need.

That we should search His Word and pray and seek to be led by His Holy Spirit.

And that we should wait patiently for Him to fulfill His Word.

These are just some of His commands. And they are a guide for aligning ourselves with God. Times will get tough, as they did for these folks in Genesis 16. So faith will be necessary.

Where in your life do you find it difficult to accept and obey God’s commands? Make no mistake: His commands are His will for you.

Now, everyone in Genesis 16 rejects God's preceptive will, and there are consequences, just as there are for us and anyone who violates the commands of God. Sarai and Abram may have assumed that the consequences had just sort of disappeared, because Hagar runs away. Maybe they had gotten around God's preceptive will somehow?

But Hagar was part of Abram's household, as was the child. For her, leaving the household of Abram was equivalent to leaving the people of God. Notice verse 7, "*The angel of the LORD found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur.*" "Shur" refers to the border of Egypt. She was going home.

If this was not the covenant child, why did God not just let her go? Apparently, at that time, Hagar needed to be with the people of God. This is why God brings her back. God pursues her and calls her to return to Abram's house.

There has been some speculation over the identity of the angel of the LORD. It literally says the messenger of Yahweh. Could this be a pre-incarnate appearance of Christ? That is highly possible. Some scholars feel strongly that this is the case where God the Son appeared and mediated between God and man, which is a role of Christ.

Notice what the messenger says in verse [9] "*Return to your mistress and submit to her.*" [10] *The angel of the LORD also said to her, "I will surely multiply your offspring so that they cannot be numbered for multitude."* We learn as we go forward in Genesis that Hagar's son is not the son through whom the Messiah will come, through whom the "seed of the woman" would one day arrive and crush the serpent's head according to Genesis 3.

Simply put, Hagar's son is not the child of the covenant. But Hagar's son and his descendants do contribute to the fulfillment of God's promise that from Abram would come "*a multitude of nations*" as Genesis 17 will tell us.

The messenger tells Hagar about her son, whom she must name "Ishmael," and that between Ismael and everyone else there will be great hostility. This plays out later on in Genesis, and it meant something to the Israelites in Moses' day, as they had conflict with the descendants of Ishmael. They learned about the origin of the conflict.

But from all that is said by the LORD's messenger in these verses, it should be clear that none of the things which had taken place surprised the living God or caught Him off guard; rather, they took place according to His sovereign decree. John Tweeddale explains God's decreative will this way: He writes, "*God's decreative will underscores His total sovereignty over all things, including creation and redemption, history and providence. As such, it can never be thwarted, not even by our sin and disobedience.*" Not even by all the evil done in the world.

God is in control, and He will accomplish all His plans. bring justice.

We don't know what it will be until it happens, but God knows. He sees it; in fact, notice verse [13]. Hagar had an encounter with God. *"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." Verse 14, Therefore the well was called Beer-lahai-roi,"* well of the Living One who sees me.

She then returns to Abram's household, bears the son, and verse 15 says, *"Abram called the name of his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael."* Abram took ownership of what he had done.

God ordained it to be so from before the foundations of the world.

Did Abram think at that point that this was the child of the promise? It's hard to say. He may have; however, God clarify that in the next chapter.

Now, some argue that God only "allows" much of what happens in the world in a way that hands over sovereignty or control to mankind. They often use the terms "perfect" and "permissive" will of God. God is described as being simply "permissive" of what occurs. But that removes God from His place as the active mover of history and puts mankind in the driver's seat. And it places Him in a passive role, just responding to things if He can.

The Scriptures of the OT and NT do not portray God in this way. Isaiah 46, God says, *"I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, 'My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose.'" What we see in Genesis 16 is people rejecting God's preceptive will but still subject to God's decretive will. They are responsible for their actions, but God's plans cannot be stopped. No one can "get away from" God.*

There's a well-known saying first attributed to the great boxer Joe Louis as he prepared to fight champion Billy Conn. To defeat Louis, Conn said his strategy would be "hit and run." When told this, Joe Louis famously replied, *"He can run, but he can't hide."*

No violator will circumvent the justice of the Living God. He is the God who sees. We observe tragedy around us continually. We see evil things done that obviously violate God's preceptive will. We see things that clearly break God's commands. But there will be a reckoning for all wrongdoing.

When the preceptive will of God is disobeyed, a debt is accrued and it shall be paid in full. Christians are called to rest in the hope that God is able to work all things together for the good of those who are called according to His purpose. But how can He do that if He is not absolutely sovereign over all that occurs?

Certainly the relationship between human responsibility and divine sovereignty is hard to understand. But it should be. In fact, it makes sense that people have come up with some more palatable, by generating an explanation that it is man-centered.

As we go to the God-centered table of the Lord this morning, we see that while the relationship between human responsibility and divine sovereignty is too lofty for us to fully comprehend, it is the plan of God.

This table shapes our understanding of the preceptive and decretive will of God. Acts 2 says that Jesus was killed by the hands of lawless men, yet He was delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God.

Those who put Jesus to death clearly broke God's commands. They rejected God's preceptive will. And yet, what took place happened according to the decrees of God. These two wills of God work together in a way too high above our understanding.

But what we can understand is that we must humble ourselves before Him. At the cross of Jesus Christ, we are confronted by God's will. We are confronted by our great need for forgiveness, and by God's great mercy and grace toward sinners who repent and believe.

Will you align yourself with God's will today? Come to Jesus.

Let's bow in prayer.