

## Trust test

### Genesis 16 – 18

In the 60's the marshmallow test was conducted by psychologist Walter Mischel at the Stanford University in America. It wasn't just cruel torture. It was designed to test the ability to RESIST IMMEDIATE GRATIFICATION. That's the purpose of the test. But for a four year old I reckon it's about as close to torture as you can get. You can have the marshmallow NOW. Or...you can WAIT....and have TWO when I get back, which in the test is fifteen minutes. But the kids don't know that.

So..... using all your FOUR or so YEARS of life skills...do you gobble it down the minute they leave the room? Or do you wait? If you wait, how long do you wait? It's a tough test. And you can see the pain on their confused little faces. Stanford University did it again just recently. And four out of ten cave in and eat the marshmallow. And as you saw. The others suffer through fifteen minutes of agonizing temptation as they touch it, roll it around, smell it, lick it, nibble it. Even put the thing in their mouth. Before they're put out of their misery and rewarded.

It's a tough test. And that's exactly the kind of test Abram's right in the middle of here in chapter 16. Do you trust God...do you trust what he'll do do you trust how and when.....or do you take matters into your own hands? That's the question.

Abram's faith is a faith we can relate to. Because in spite of his commitment to the promises of God, the temptation is always to cut corners. Despite his

commitment to the promises of God, the temptation is always to do it himself.  
And hurry things along.

You remember God's promises to Abram back in chapter 12. A few weeks ago for us. Which seems like a bit of time. But spare a thought for Abram. Because more than ten years have gone by. Since God's promises came to him.

Promise number 1. The promise to this sonless man of becoming a great nation.  
Number 2. The promise of land. For his offspring to live in. And promise number  
3. That the world would be blessed through him.

Three promises. Which on the face of them are unlikely... because from the very start we've been told Abram's wife Sarai is infertile. And they're getting on in age as well.

75 years young then. Now he's 86.

And God seems to be dangling something in front of them that seems absolutely impossible

But God promised. And we saw last time, Abram believes. Abram takes him at his word. Which ultimately, is what faith is.

And while he's got plenty of cattle and camels. There's still no kids in sight. And Sarai who was barren before. Is still barren and eleven years older. But God's promised. And their waiting.....and hoping and wondering....

UNTIL.... Sarai finally cracks. Sarai can't bear it any longer. And you can see it there in the first verse. And if you're the perceptive type you'll pick up the frustration and the confusion.

"Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. But she had an Egyptian maidservant named Hagar, so she said to Abram, "The Lord has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my maidservant; perhaps I can build a family through her."

See what she's saying? She's saying, "It hasn't happened by now. It's not going to happen. God's not coming through. At least in the way I'm expecting. We've waited. We've tried doing things his way. And it's not doing any good. He's stopping me from having children. So we'll do things another way."

Which might remind you of another husband and wife situation we've seen before. Back in Genesis 3. In the garden. Where she says, "God hasn't got what's best for us in mind. Here. Take the fruit." And he takes it. And eats it.

This time she says, "God hasn't got what's best for us in mind. Take the maid." And he takes her. And he sleeps with her.

This is the same Abram who refused to take any booty from the king of Sodom. Because he trusted in God to provide for him. Because he promised. Now he takes Hagar from his wife. To provide the promised son.

And the plan is, they'll bring about God's promise with a shortcut. Instead of waiting and trusting, they'll do it themselves. Because 11 years is just too long to keep waiting. And who knows how much longer it'll be.

It's all there in the next six words. "Abram agreed to what Sarai said.

So Sarai took her Egyptian maidservant Hagar and gave her to her husband to be his wife. He slept with Hagar, and she conceived." There it is.

Doesn't matter what excuses you want to make, doesn't matter how right it seems at the time. God's blessing is never going to come from fixing things yourself. From gratifying your desires your way.

Now. In Mischel's test. There's no harm done in eating the marshmallow. Apart from missing out on the second one.

But this decision is a ticking time bomb. As world war three breaks out at Abram's place.

Hagar finds out she's pregnant. Exactly what they thought they wanted. Again a bit like in the garden. But there's not much joy. It says there in verse 4, she starts despising her mistress. And Sarah does the wife thing and blames Abram, and calls down God's judgement on him. And Abram does the husband thing and ducks the issue altogether. She's all yours, says Abram - she's in your hands. And Sarah treats Hagar so badly that she takes off into the desert.

Abram and Sarah have jumped the gun and done things their way. Instead of waiting for God to deliver on what he'd promised. And the result? Well it's misery all 'round. Misery for Sarah. Misery for Hagar. Misery for Abraham. And misery for the world that's going to last for generations.

You can see that in the rest of the chapter - an angel of the Lord comes to Hagar by a spring in the desert; and says, "Go back to Sarah and submit to her. You're going to have a son; and you'll name him Ishmael, because God has heard of your misery." And he says, God's going to increase your descendants as well; they'll be too numerous to count.

Abram's going to have a son all right. But he's not the son of blessing. Look at verse 12. Ishmael's going to bring the opposite. Ishmael's going to bring division. And hostility. And disharmony. Verse 12. "He'll be a wild donkey of a man; his hand will be against everyone and everyone's hand against him, and he will live in hostility towards all his brothers."

And for generation after generation, that's the exactly what happens.

Can you see how it works? Abram and Sarah try take matters into their own hands. Arrange a few descendants their own way. And instead of bringing blessing, they end up with a donkey. Who's going to bring nothing but hostility. Which is exactly how Ishmael and his descendants turn out.

It's a tough lesson..... And there's consequences. But God's still committed to his promises. And 13 years later. God speaks again. Abram's 99 now. If it was

unlikely they'd have kids 24 years ago. It's IMPOSSIBLE NOW. Which is maybe the point.

But God appears to Abram and basically confirms the same things he's said all along. And Abram obeys by circumcising everyone in his family. Which God tells him to do. To confirm the covenant. And on top of that now Abram's going to be Abraham. Which means Father of many. Which I guess heightens the whole issue again. Sarai's going to be Sarah. Because the children will be from her. And she'll be Sarah Because she's going to be the mother. The mother of Kings. And you know what Abraham and Sarah do? .....They laugh.

Which you do. When we were in Sydney there was a lady in our church by the name of Bev. And Bev had a fifteen year old and a ten year old. And I'm pretty sure she'd hit 40 at least. I'm pretty sure they were done having kids. Or they thought they were. But apparently not. And when Luke made the announcement at church. That the Bowens were having another one. He could hardly contain himself for laughing. There were smirks and hands over mouths all round.

But Sarah's not FORTY. She's NINETY. And Abraham the father of many. He's NINETY-NINE.

And for twenty four years nothing's happened. So they laugh. And Abraham again offers up Ishmael to be the son that God blesses. And he laughs to himself. Now it's a harsh person that comes down hard on Abraham here. Because he can't conceive (pardon the pun), he can't conceive how this could happen. It's just too hard. It's impossible.

But that's where he's wrong. And you can see that beautifully in verse 14. Chapter 18, verse 14; a famous verse. And one we always need to remember. Write it down and stick it on your fridge. "Is anything too hard for the Lord? This time next year, Sarah... is going to become a mum." This same Lord who made the heavens and the earth; this same Lord who spoke and said let there be light. Do you really reckon he can't fix up your problems his way? Do you reckon he's not quite up to doing what he promised? Do you reckon anything's too hard for God?

Do you reckon, says the apostle Paul much later... that God couldn't raise his own son from the dead? Do you reckon he couldn't give new life to you? No matter how far things have gone wrong? Do you reckon the God who called the whole universe into being couldn't give Abraham and Sarah a son like he promised?

So Abraham, here's what you've got to do. Trust him. And do things his way, instead of your way.

Which is a tough lesson.

Verse 18, God reminds him of the promises. "Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him. For I have chosen him, says God, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just, so that the Lord will bring about for Abraham what he promised him.

And Sarah... is going to be the mum. And it's only going to take another 12 months. But the gameplan is, and don't be mistaken... the game plan is, if you're

going to trust God, that means you're going to keep his ways by doing what's right and just. No shortcuts.

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Paul says in his letter to the Romans, chapter 1, and verse 4, that through the risen Jesus Christ and for his name's sake, he says "we received grace and apostleship to call people from among all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith."

Which means that faith isn't just a feeling. It's a confidence in God's promises that leads to a commitment. It's a trust... that says, I'll do it God's way. And not try to fix it myself.

Paul says later on in Romans 4, that ultimately, Abraham was strengthened in his faith... that he believed God could bring new life from his almost dead body and Sarah's dead womb. In the same way, says Paul, that we believe in him who raised our Lord Jesus from the dead. If he can do that, he can do what's best for you.

And God's way. The way of obedience..Is the way of sexual purity. Even when it's hard. God's way. Is the way of servant like sacrifice. God's way. Is the way of humility and integrity.

Do you reckon God needs a helping hand... to fix your life?

Because it might seem easier to just write that relationship off. Than to work hard at it. To forgive. To say sorry. It might seem easier to just sign the paperwork and get that divorce. Than to do the hard work of sticking at that marriage.

So easy to resolve my financial situation by compromising my honesty.

to resolve my career situation by compromising my integrity or my family life or my involvement in church.

To give in to that sexual desire. Than to stay pure.

To make myself feel better...by putting others down.

Here's one worth thinking about. It's easier to just send my kids off to get their Christian teaching from the church or the school. Than to model it and make the effort of teaching them myself.

Easier to live just like everybody else. Than to be different because of what God's done for us in Jesus.

It's a truism that shortcuts tend to lead to disasters. It looks like BP took plenty of them prior to this huge oil spill off the coast of America.

Now let me just say. That as you look at Abraham. You see the problems that come from taking shortcuts. But there's something else too. You also learn that even though sometimes we make those poor choices. Those sinful choices really. And that sometimes there are consequences that are ongoing from that. You also learn that God's promises still hold. And you can be forgiven. After all, Abraham gets his new name after not just one failure, but quite a few.

So this isn't a guilt trip. It's a call to trust God at his word.

And it can be tough to obey. But that's what believers do. They trust the one they believe. And they wait for him. Paul says of the Thessalonians. How others are so amazed at the faith of the Thessalonians. Because they **TURNE**D. And they **WAITED**.

SLIDE

1 Thessalonians 1:9-10 They tell how you **turned** to God from idols to serve the living and true God, <sup>10</sup> and to **wait** for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead-- Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.

I take it that means their motivation for how they live. What's driving them in their decisions. Is more about God's promises and what he's holding out for them in Christ. Than what they can make a quick grab for themselves. It's the obedience that comes from faith.

It's that hope in Christ, that new perspective on the world. Of what God's promised. That means you keep trusting. And that even though I'm tempted to think I can fix things my own way, the life of faith is going to mean keeping on trusting God. Who works all things together for good... in his time... to make his people more like his son.

