

A few years ago, parents in the United States started getting some unusual nicknames. First, there were “Helicopter Parents.” These were parents who figuratively – and sometimes literally – hovered over their children's lives. Watching everything they did. Everyone they played with. Insuring they were never in any danger.

Then came the “Tiger Moms”. Mothers who would drive their children to perform with incredible intensity. Push them to be involved in more and more activities, while simultaneously demanding perfection and excellence in everything they did. No matter how miserable they made their kids.

But recently, I heard about a new parenting nickname. And they will stop at nothing to ensure their child’s success. This new style of parenting is called “Snowplow” parenting. And they're an interesting amalgamation of the two others. These parents are intent on removing any obstacles in the way of their child, in order that their child does not have to face pain or difficulty on their way to success.

If their child struggles, “Snowplow” parents will take matters into their own hands and accomplish those challenges on their own. Thinking that they are helping their child without realizing the long-term consequences of their approach.

I can understand this to some degree. For example, there have been plenty of times that I have gotten impatient while helping my daughter with her math homework. It would be so much easier to just give her the answer rather than have her struggle to get to the solution on her own. But then, of course, she wouldn't have learned anything.

We all tend to want to take matters into our own hands when something is not going quite right or taking too long. And that's exactly the situation in which we find Abraham and Sarah in Genesis 16. Twice now, Abraham has received a promise from God that he would be the father of many and that through his descendants God would bless the whole world. Abraham and Sarah both believed God’s promise.

But that promise seems like a long time ago now. Abraham and Sarah weren’t young when God originally made it. They certainly weren’t getting any younger. And over these many years Sarah has shown herself to be barren. She cannot have any children.

And so they begin to think: Maybe they need to take things into their own hands. Maybe God needs a little help fulfilling this promise. Maybe it would just be easier for everyone if they solved this problem for Him.

So Sarah comes up with a plan. God had said that Abraham and Sarah would have a son. But perhaps Sarah doesn't really need to be involved. If just Abraham has a son, that's close for the promise to be fulfilled, right? She offers her servant, Hagar, to Abraham as a concubine, that he might obtain children from her. Abraham goes along with the plan. Hagar becomes pregnant. And, for a moment, it looks like the plan has worked.

Or... not. I've often had people ask me about the issue of polygamy and concubines in the Bible. Is this OK? Why did God allow this practice? My usual response is that Jesus defines marriage in Matthew 19 as one man and one woman joined into one flesh by God. Anything else is against God's definition of marriage. God tolerated, for a time, the practice of polygamy and concubines, but never endorses it anywhere in scripture. And one thing we see consistently, over and over again, is that those examples of polygamy and concubines that we see in scripture always result in misery and suffering for the people involved.

This case of Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, and Ishmael is a perfect example. Hagar becomes pregnant and begins to look with contempt upon Sarah for her infertility. Hagar’s behavior gets so bad that Sarah treats her badly in return, which caused Hagar run away. God eventually convinces Hagar to return to Sarah, and Hagar gives birth to Ishmael. But God makes it clear to Abraham in Genesis 17 that all of this emotional turmoil was for nothing. Ishmael is not the son that God promised.

“You will have a son by Sarah,” God tells Abraham, who is now one hundred years old, while Sarah is ninety. So Abraham replies, “Oh, that Ishmael might live before you!” Abraham is effectively trying to talk God into his plan. “It's OK God. I already took care of it. Here's Ishmael, my son.” But God says, “No. Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac.”

Abraham and Sarah did not need to take matters into their own hands to have a son and kick start God's plan of blessing. God was going to take care of fulfilling His promise in His own way and in His own time. Just like he always does.

It's a lesson that we need to learn sometimes as well. When it comes to the blessings and promises of God, it's easy to think that we have to take matters into our own hands.

Maybe we imagine that we have to activate God's promises by cleaning up our lives or showing Him how sincerely and earnestly we believe. Maybe we think we can manipulate God by our good works and force Him to pour out blessings upon us. Maybe we become impatient with God as we wait for promises that he hasn't really made. We secretly believe that being a child of God is a ticket to health, wealth, and prosperity, if only we prove ourselves to him.

And in so doing, we exchange the freedom of the Gospel for the slavery of the Law. Rather than living under the freedom of Jesus' words “It is finished!” and trusting that it truly is, we live under the slavery of the Law, which always says “Do more! Try harder! Earn it!”

In the Book of Galatians, Paul repeatedly demonstrated the foolishness of this thinking. In Galatians 3, he writes, “For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse... Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for ‘The righteous shall live by faith’”.

In chapter 4, Paul illustrates this argument with the story of Hagar and Sarah. He writes: “Now this story may be interpreted allegorically: these women are two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar... She corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children.”

In other words, Hagar represents the Law given at Mount Sinai. And all those who submit to the slavery of the Law are children of Hagar. They are Ishmaels. And, ironically enough, Paul says that Jerusalem of his day, the seat of the Jews, the biological descendants of Isaac, have become spiritually more like Ishmael than like Isaac. Because they are slaves of Law.

And what eventually happened to Hagar and Ishmael? They were cast out, by God's own command. Ishmael was not the son of the promise. He was the son produced by Abraham's efforts. He was a work of the law. And he was rejected. He did not receive God's promise. Just as those who rely on the Law for their salvation will be rejected and will not receive God's promise.

But God called Abraham and Sarah to trust in His promise and live by faith. God would take care of it. He didn't need their help. And though it seemed impossible, Sarah gave birth to a son, the son of the promise, Isaac.

Paul continues, “Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise... we are not children of the slave but of the free woman.” All those who live by faith, not by works, are sons of the promise, sons of Abraham, and receivers of God's blessings.

But it is not faith in Isaac that brings the blessings of God's salvation. It is faith in the true Son of Abraham. Jesus. The Son through whom the whole world is blessed. The Son whose work sets us free from slavery to the Law.

This Son would also be born through miraculous circumstances, to a woman who thought it impossible to have a child. Not through an old, barren woman, but through a young virgin. This Son would also walk up a mountain to be a sacrifice, carrying the wood of the sacrifice on his shoulders. But unlike Isaac, saved by God's provision, this Son would actually be pierced for our transgressions.

Jesus is the true Son of Abraham who gives to us the eternal blessings of his life and salvation. As Paul says earlier in Galatians, “For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ... And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise.”

As the old camp song says, “Father Abraham had many sons. Many sons had Father Abraham. I am one of them, and so are you. So let’s all praise the Lord!” Amen.