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# An Impatient Faith

## Genesis 16

The man who has been walking by faith now hears and heeds bad counsel.

Why does everything seem to be so hard so often?

Sometimes Christians struggle because their own faith is weak. Sometimes Christians struggle because they listen to counsel of others whose faith is weak. Abram went down into Egypt and lied about Sarah because of fear and weak faith. But here, Sarah's faith is weak, her counsel folly and the consequences disastrous.

What do we do when it appears that what God has promised is not unfolding on our timeline? This is a time when we can walk by faith or by sight, by trusting in the wise providences of God or by turning to the human scheming. Impatience even in faith will bring difficulties and struggles.

This is what we will see this morning. Faith will be impatient. Impatience will lead to bad counsel. Bad counsel will bring forth poor choices. Poor choices give birth to many, many painful consequences. We will see this through Sarah, Hagar and Ishmael. And, we will probably see it in ourselves as well.

### **Sarah – the Reliance on Human Wisdom (v.1-6)**

**16** Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. She had a female Egyptian servant whose name was Hagar. <sup>2</sup> And Sarai said to Abram, "Behold now, the LORD has prevented me from bearing children. Go in to my servant; it may be that I shall obtain children by her." And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai. <sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> And he went in to Hagar, and she conceived. And when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress. <sup>5</sup> And Sarai said to Abram, "May the wrong done to me be on you! I gave my servant to your embrace, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt. May the LORD judge between you and me!" <sup>6</sup> But Abram said to Sarai, "Behold, your servant is in your power; do to her as you please." Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she fled from her.

The opening sentence says it all. Sarah has borne Abram no children. Here are people with a promise and problem.

### **In her Challenge (v.1)**

Being childless in our culture grieves people who want children. It is sometimes a difficult problem. But in Abram and Sarah's day, being childless was a shame, a disgrace. Childless women were assumed to have done something awful either

against God or against their husbands. It is difficult for us to put ourselves in Sarah's shoes, to feel the stigma that she bore.

Being childless when God has promised a child to Abram is a very great challenge to Sarah's faith. Up till now, the promise has been given directly to Abram. He is the one who will father a son and many descendants. Now Sarah sees herself growing old, getting beyond the child-bearing age.

This is a real problem for Sarah. What can be done? How will she ensure that Abram has a son and she retains her position as the matriarch of the family, the tribe? Sarah devises a solution to their dilemma. She has a maid servant, probably acquired while they were in Egypt. This young lady's name is Hagar. Maybe, Sarah reasons, Hagar is the solution.

### **In her Counsel (v.2-4)**

So she comes to Abram with her proposal. Sarah notes that it is God who has closed up her womb. God has providentially withheld her from bearing a child. God must have another way in mind. So, Sarah will give Hagar to Abram to bear his children in her stead. Hagar will be a surrogate mother. Now, let's stop just a moment and get oriented to the culture.

This was a common practice in their culture. Several ancient manuscripts from around this period refer to varying forms of this practice. A queen, an important tribal matriarch, the wife of a rich landowner, could take her bought and owned slave, give her to the husband to have relations with her and the child would be recognized as a full heir of the husband and accounted the son of the wife.

She may also be reasoning that since Abram is the one to whom the promise has been given and nothing has so far been said that the son must be Sarah's (that will come in a later chapter), then as long as Abram is the father and Hagar is his concubine or wife, then that son will fulfill the conditions and be the promised heir.

I think it is easy to be sympathetic to Sarah's plight and to her proposal. It is entirely reasonable. It rings true with human logic. It even has the strength of affirming the promise of God and aiming to see that promise fulfilled. Her motivation appears to be commendable. Her willingness to put Hagar forward might even feel like humility. Her approach to her husband has a spiritual ring to it.

However, it is all wrong. This is faith, yes. It is believing that God will fulfill His promise. But it is weak faith. It is unwilling to wait for God's timing. It is not going to persist in faith, but rather to reason its way out through fleshly scheming. Brothers and sisters, we are so like this. We believe God but then we scheme to help God. We may have faith, but it is weak.

Abram listened to Sarah. There are times not to heed the counsel of our spouses. This word *heed* is important here. Moses is clearly showing that this is going to be trouble. Abram's heeding of Sarah's counsel here is clearly being pitted over against heeding the voice of God. Commentators detect in the way the text is

written a weak compliance on Abram's part where there ought to have been a wise discernment, strong faith and a gracious, but firm rejection of this bad counsel.

All counsel and all choices have consequences. Abram takes Hagar to be a concubinage-wife. She becomes pregnant. Now, there is dissension and division as Hagar despises Sarah. She looks down on her master because she is able to do what Sarah cannot; that is, give Abram a son. She will have the favor of Abram. She may even entertain thoughts of displacing Sarah. But she has contempt for Sarah.

### **In her Complaint (v.5-6)**

We do not know how long this situation went on. Probably not long. Hagar evidently makes no attempt to hide her contempt and disdain for Sarah. So, Sarah responds by complaining to Abram. She blames Abram for the present situation. She wants him to take responsibility for the consequences. Notice the subtle dig – "I gave her into your embrace." In the disdain of Hagar, Sarah may feel a threat to her place and position. If Abram embraces Hagar in love, then where will this leave Sarah who has no child?

Abram is not going to take responsibility. He is not going to confront Hagar. She is not his problem. She is Sarah's problem. Sarah ought to have known this was a likely outcome. Hagar is Sarah's maid, her servant. She is in Sarah's hand and under her power and authority. "You deal with it. You deal with her as suits you"

Well, it may be gratifying to hear repeated in the Bible the kinds of discussions that often go on in our homes, but it is ungodly on all their parts. Hagar ought not to hold her master in contempt. Sarah ought not blame Abram for, in effect, taking her counsel. Abram ought to step in as head of his home and deal with Hagar. Foolish choices following poor counsel will almost certainly lead to difficult consequences. Here is an opportunity for Sarah to acknowledge her fault, to humbly yet kindly confront Hagar. But this is not what she does. She makes life miserable for Hagar. So in the early weeks of her pregnancy, with all the attendant discomforts and adjustments, Hagar is treated so badly, so harshly, that she is afraid. And so she flees.

### **Hagar – the Revelation of Divine Grace (v.7-14)**

<sup>7</sup> The angel of the LORD found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur. <sup>8</sup> And he said, "Hagar, servant of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?" She said, "I am fleeing from my mistress Sarai." <sup>9</sup> The angel of the LORD said to her, "Return to your mistress and submit to her." <sup>10</sup> The angel of the LORD also said to her, "I will surely multiply your offspring so that they cannot be numbered for multitude." <sup>11</sup> And the angel of the LORD said to her,

"Behold, you are pregnant and shall bear a son. You shall call his name Ishmael, because the LORD has listened to your affliction. <sup>12</sup> He shall be a wild donkey of a man, his hand against everyone and everyone's hand against him, and he shall dwell over against all his kinsmen."

<sup>13</sup> 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."

<sup>14</sup>Therefore the well was called Beer-lahai-roi; it lies between Kadesh and Bered.

Hagar is now the main actor on the stage. As she flees from Sarah the camera follows her out into the wilderness. There, she will experience a revelation of God's divine grace and mercy.

### **In God's Pursuit (v.7-9)**

The angel of the Lord meets and confronts Hagar where she apparently has stopped by a spring for water. She is on her way through the wilderness headed home to Egypt. This is a long and dangerous journey. But the angel of the Lord pursues her and meets her there.

This is the first reference to *the angel of the Lord*. This Angel is identified with Yahweh in 16:13, as well as in 22:11-12; 31:11, 13; 48:16 (Judges 6:11, 16, 22; 13:22-23; Zechariah 3:1-2). Yet the Angel is distinct from God (Genesis 24:7; 2 Samuel 24:16; Zechariah 1:12). Thus "the Angel of the LORD" may refer to a theophany of the preincarnate Christ (cf. Genesis 18:1-2; 19:1; Numbers 22:22; Judges 2:1-4; 5:23; Zechariah 12:8). [*The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, Logos Edition]. We must not miss something here. God's heaven-sent messenger who may be the preincarnate Christ confronts and comforts the persecuted and the suffering. The mercy and grace of God is embodied in the Angel of the Lord seeking Hagar.

Again, notice the use of heart exposing questions in his confrontation of Hagar. He addresses her as the servant of Sarah. So where did she come from? Where are you going? These two questions constitute a "why have you left your proper place and are now running away?" She responds with the truth. She is running away. And she must return. Even though suffering and hardship may be involved, God's loving challenge and command to her is to return to her place.

We see this all through the Bible. Our natural tendency is to escape suffering and persecution. We often just try to avoid *stress*. But when submission is involved, God often calls us to stay under and serve well. This speaks to us in our jobs, in our homes with children and wives, in our country with our government.

### **In a Prophecy (v.10-12)**

If she is going to return to submit and possibly suffer, then she must have the encouragement of God's Word. This prophecy here, over her descendants and her son, functions as God's encouraging word. In this prophecy, Hagar is to recognize her being a part of the promise to Abram. She will have many descendants through a son because of God's promise. Now this will not be the *promised* son, but he and his descendants will be blessed. He will be called Ishmael, that is, "God hears" because God has heard. Ishmael's name then is a reward for Hagar and, as we will see in a moment, a rebuke to Abram and Sarah.

However, Ishmael and his descendants will be wild and rebellious. There will be constant friction between Abram's descendants and Ishmael's. This has been borne out in history. Ishmael's descendants are the Arabs. They have been a constant trouble to the Jews even to this day.

### **In her Perception (v.13-14)**

Hagar responds by giving a name to God. He is "One Who Sees Me" God. And she commemorates the event by naming the well where she was, Beer-lahai-roi; the "Well of the Living One Who Sees Me." In the book of beginnings, the book of Genesis, here is the first time a person assigns a name to God. She responds to His care for her and His Word to her.

She recognizes herself as one who is always visible to God. She is stunned by *Coram Deo*. She may have thought to escape Yahweh as a local, tribal god by returning to her homeland. But now she knows there is nowhere to run from the gaze of God. One cannot flee to where the grace of God cannot reach. God sees her. Do we know this as well? Are we aware of the gaze of God on our lives?

She also understands God's gaze is one of care and concern. So there may be a sobering effect of being under God's eye, but that is also a satisfying effect. God sees in a way that causes Him to move towards us and even, metaphorically, to run after us. God is not only looking at us, but He is also looking after us.

### **Ishmael – The Rebuke of Impatient Waiting (v.15-16)**

This final paragraph is to remind us that human scheming may be successful in one aspect and also bring difficult consequences as well. Ishmael, as long as he is home, will be a rebuke of their impatient waiting.

<sup>15</sup> And Hagar bore Abram a son, and Abram called the name of his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. <sup>16</sup> Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram.

### **In his Birth**

Verse 15 establishes that God recognizes Ishmael as a descendent of Abram. Thus, he will be blessed because of God's promise to him. Yet, Ishmael is not the promised one. He is the son of a daughter of Egypt. When God's promises are mixed with the world's ways, trouble will follow.

### **In his Name**

The point here is in Ishmael's name. It means, "Do you hear?" Hagar will hear this as a blessing, for God heard her. But it will be a rebuke to Abram and Sarah. For the name is a question over them. Do they hear? Imagine, every time he is called to supper; every time he is honored on his birthday; every time he corrected or spanked, Abram and Sarah are asked, "Do you hear?" This has the strength of "Don't you listen?" God has promised and they must be patient.

### **In his Future**

One more note: this son of an Egyptian maid becomes the father of a tribe of people who will later carry Joseph into slavery and become a long thorn in the side of Abram's descendants. For Ishmael is the father of the Ishmaelites of the rest of Genesis and the Arabs of the rest of history.

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## Reflect and Respond

In conclusion, let me gather up some lessons and some trajectories.

*REAL FAITH CAN LEAD TO IMPATIENCE.* Abram and Sarah believe God's promise, but are struggling with God's providence. They are trying to resolve the problem of having a son and growing old and unable. So we must also recognize impatience in the midst of faith. We believe what God promises, and we want it now. Isn't it strange that even that which God promises can be an idol: we want it so bad we'll sin to get it or sin when we don't have it.

*WE MUST BE ABLE TO DISCERN BAD COUNSEL.* God holds us accountable for hearing and heeding bad, foolish, unwise or sinful counsel. It will often sound like good advice. It may come with the ring of authority from the voice of an expert. It may come through a relationship where saying no brings conflict. It may twist the Bible to justify it. It may even contradict the Bible. Often through, it is subtle in its persuasiveness. But more often than not, we are simply not discerning. We don't weigh the advice we are being given to see if it is true, wise and holy.

*ALL CHOICES HAVE CONSEQUENCES.* This is a simple, but profoundly denied principle of living in God's world. Even when we are trying to help God out, bad choices will breed bad consequences. Listen young people and teens: some of you think that sowing your wild oats, "boys will be boys", "it's just for now" are acceptable rationales. They are not. You will reap what you sow. No one is too young to ignore this. Many of us have "wild oats" harvests in our lives. Every choice you make will have consequences.

*GOD PURSUES THE WAYWARD.* The Lord Jesus Christ goes after the one lost sheep, the one lost coin, the one prodigal son. These are not unbelievers. These are those who are in the fold, part of the home, true sons. We must rejoice with God's great grace, His concern to go after the wayward and His joy over their repentance.

*GROW STRONG IN FAITH THROUGH PATIENT WAITING ON GOD'S PROMISES.* Listen to what Paul wrote of Abram in Romans 4:18-21. *In hope he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been told, "So shall your offspring be." He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.* [ESV] Growing strong in faith is a process. There is never arrival. This faith that is impatient will eventually become an unwavering belief in which there is no distrust. Through that growing and eventually unwavering faith, he brought glory to God by giving glory to God. And so can we. It should be so encouraging that we are on the same kind of journey. Our faith is at times strong and at times weak. Our faith at times holds fast and at times listens impatiently to unwise counsel. But it can grow and become unwavering, bringing glory to God.

Finally, a trajectory. Paul in Galatians 4:21-31 draws from this narrative a grand lesson for us. Hagar and Sarah point us to slavery and freedom. Hagar is a slave who bears a son. She represents all ways of salvation and transformation that rely on the flesh and use a law

system. She represents the way to try to come to God through doing good and obeying the Law. Paul says that is earthly, fleshly, futile and deadly. This way leads to being enslaved in sin and condemned to hell.

Sarah points us to freedom. She is the freewoman who later bears a son and whose sons are all true believers. She represents the salvation from God in heaven, being born of God from above. This is the true way of salvation and transformation. This is the way of turning from reliance on my good to trust in Jesus' death and resurrection. This is being saved, not by law or good works, but by faith in Christ.

So, how do you stand? Are you trusting in your good works and thus are lost? Or will you trust in Jesus alone for your salvation and holiness? That kind of saving faith, unwavering trust in Jesus, does not boast in self but in God. That kind of saving faith, glorifies God. Will you trust Him now?