

Genesis 16  
Psalm 45  
1 Peter 2:13-3:7

“Sex and the City of God”

June 14, 2009

In verse three we hear that Abram has been in the land for ten years.

Ten years – and no children.

In verse 16 we hear that he is 86 years old when Ishmael is born.

These time markers remind us that God’s timing  
does not neatly fit into what we would like.

So Abram and Sarai decide to take matters into their own hands.

We saw last time that when God makes his covenant with Abram,

God alone passes between the pieces of the animals.

God alone will fulfill his covenant.

“Don’t just do something, stand there!”

Abram can do *nothing* to bring about the fulfillment of the covenant.

Abram can do *nothing* to achieve the salvation of the human race.

Salvation is the work of God.

When it comes to accomplishing redemption,

Abram is impotent.

You cannot save yourself.

Left to human ingenuity and know-how,

humanity would perish.

Because only God can save.

We sing about this in the glorious wedding song of the son of David.

Psalm 45 speaks of the Son of David as a divine figure.

We need a king – we need a Savior – who is truly human,  
but who is also truly God.

Psalm 45 begins by speaking of the glory of the King,

but then in verse 9 the Psalmist turns to the beauty of the princess.

As we sing Psalm 45 we should start with the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ,

the blessed Son of David – the Seed of Abraham.

But then we should see that we have been joined to Christ –

we are the bride of Christ –

and with our Lord Jesus Christ,

we are to busy making babies!

So let us sing Psalm 45

1 Peter 2-3

I've entitled this sermon "Sex and the City of God" –  
though in a very real way, that title belongs to the whole of Genesis.

We think that we live in a sex-crazed world.

And we do.

But we need to understand that nothing has *really* changed.

Oh, we have developed technologically,  
so that the challenges have changed.

And human societies go back and forth in terms of how brazen and open they are,  
and the precise issues may vary,  
but the fundamental issues are still the same.

For instance in verses 1-6 we see the problem of barrenness  
and the proposed solution of polygamy.

Today Sarai would have proposed in vitro fertilization,  
or other technological solutions.

But until recently, the solution to barrenness was the one that Sarai proposed:

### **1. Barrenness and Polygamy (16:1-6)**

This passage follows a repeating structure:

Sarai proposes something (v1-2)

Abram agrees (v2)

Sarai acts (v3)

Hagar reacts (v4)

Then Sarai again proposes something (v5)

Abram agrees (v6)

Sarai acts (v6)

Hagar reacts (v6)

Sarai is the main actor in this story.

She is the one with the ideas.

She is the one who acts.

*I Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children.*

*She had a female Egyptian servant whose name was Hagar.*

As we saw in Genesis 2, Eve was created (actually, "built") by God  
in order to be a suitable "helper."

What does Eve do to help?

She bears children.

As we saw in Genesis 2, the word "helper"  
refers to one who enables another to be and to do  
what they are called to be and to do.

Throughout the Psalms God is called "my helper" because without God's help,  
the Davidic king will be a complete and utter failure.

In the same way, without Eve's help Adam cannot fulfill his calling.

Sarai feels this keenly.

Without *her* help, Abram cannot fulfill his calling.

God has promised her husband the land.

God has promised her husband a seed (offspring).

She cannot help (she's around 75 at this time  
and may have already been through menopause).

And so Sarai proposes a solution.

*2 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.”*

Literally, “maybe I can be built from her.”

In Hebrew the way that you say “have children” is to be “built”!

Think about what we have seen in Genesis.

The seed of the serpent is building cities.

The seed of the woman is building altars –  
and now building families.

This would suggest that Sarai has good intentions.

Sarai wants to see the promise of God fulfilled,

and thinks that the only way for her to have children is through a surrogate

We need to see the reasonableness of this solution.

Polygamy had not been forbidden at this point.

Moses' hearers will not think this poor judgment –  
after all, Jacob did the very same thing

when Rachel and Leah gave him their handmaids.

Four of the tribes of Israel were descended from a similar arrangement.

So this is a culturally accepted way of dealing with barrenness –  
that God had not forbidden.

*And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai.*

This is the first clue, though, that something is amiss.

The only other place where this phrase occurs is in Genesis 3:17,

when God condemns Adam for listening to the voice of his wife!

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.*

Do the verbs in verse 3 sound familiar?

“She took...and gave...to her husband?”

It is the same exact basic sentence as Genesis 3:6.

Sarai is the new Eve who convinces her husband to follow her plan.

4 *And he went in to Hagar, and she conceived.  
And when she saw that she had conceived,  
she looked with contempt on her mistress.*

Perhaps we don't realize how bad this is,

because we do not live in a slave-society.

Hagar is the maidservant of Sarai.

She is better than a common slave,

but she is nowhere near the same status as Sarai.

Sarai has requested her servant to help provide an heir.

Hagar has done this,

but then rather than humbly serve,

she rises up in proud disdain of her mistress.

The word for “contempt” here is the word used in 12:3

when God says that the one who *curse*s you will be cursed.

Hagar is cursing Sarah.

Think back to what we read from 1 Peter 2.

Servants (or slaves) are not to treat their masters in this way –  
especially a believing mistress like Sarai.

5 *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!”*

What do you think of this?

Is Sarai overreacting?

Is she getting a little dramatic?

Proverbs 30:23 says that the earth trembles

under a maidservant who displaces her mistress.

At this point, Sarai is in the right.

She has been wronged by her maidservant.  
Hagar is getting uppity,  
and Abram is doing nothing to stop it.

*6 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.*

In other words, no one comes away as the “good guy” in this passage.

Abram is passive.

Sarai leads her husband down the wrong path (like Eve)

and is harsh to her servant (like the Egyptians)

Hagar is uppity and curses Sarai (bringing the curse of Abraham upon her).

So what should we think about verses 1-6?

Sarai understands the promise of 15:4.

God has promised her husband that his own son shall be his heir.

She believes that promise, but does not believe that she will ever bear children.

So she does what any self-respecting woman would do in her position.

She gives her servant to her husband in order to make sure that he has an heir.

We are tempted to say that this is a wicked thing—just look at the result:

Ishmael is not given a place with Isaac as an heir of the promise.

But God does not condemn Abraham, Sarah, or Hagar for this practice.

Rather, God says that it was entirely beside the point.

Some might point to Galatians 4 with its contrast between Hagar and Sarah,  
and say “ah, but this proves that this was wrong!”

We’ll look more at that passage in a few weeks

when we come to the conflict between Ishmael and Isaac,

but for now it is enough to say that Ishmael is identified

as the son born according to the flesh – in other words –

the “ordinary” way.

All of us were born according to the flesh, in very ordinary ways.

So Galatians 4 suggests that Paul views Ishmael as an ordinary son –

not as a bad son.

The problem is that the ordinary will never change anything.

As long as everything remains ordinary,

God’s blessing will never come to the nations!

We need a son who will be born according to the Spirit –

in an extraordinary way!

And only God can ensure that the promised seed is born according to the Spirit—  
not according to the flesh.

## 2. Submission and Blessing (16:7-14)

7 *The angel of the Lord found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur.*

8 *And he said, "Hagar, servant of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?"*

Bruce Waltke points out that *never* in all of Ancient Near Eastern literature is a woman addressed by name by any deity. God will *refer* to Sarah by name, but he does not *address her* by name.

But the LORD calls Hagar by her name in verse 8. Such is the love of the LORD for his people – that he calls even the Egyptian maidservant by name!

*She said, "I am fleeing from my mistress Sarai."*

Literally, I am fleeing from the face of my mistress.

The idea of being before someone's face is important in Hebrew.

In 3:8 Adam and Eve hid themselves from the "face of the LORD."

In 4:14-16 Cain is driven away from the "face of the LORD."

In 6:11 the earth was corrupt in the face of the LORD.

In 11:28 Haran died before the face of his father, Terah.

Pretty much any time you see something in the OT which talks about something happening "in the presence" of someone, it is translating the Hebrew word "face."

Why is this important?

Hagar is fleeing from the face of her mistress.

But it is only before the face of her master and mistress that Hagar has hope.

She has cursed Sarai.

She has cursed the mother of her Lord.

In response, the angel of the LORD says three things to her:

First,

9 *The angel of the Lord said to her,*

*"Return to your mistress and submit to her."*

If she does not humble herself and return to Sarai, her lawful mistress, then there will be no blessing for Hagar and her children.

Second,

10 *The angel of the Lord also said to her,*

*"I will surely multiply your offspring so that they cannot be numbered for multitude."*

If she does return, then she will participate in the blessing of Abram.

And third,

*11 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.*

This is the first “birth announcement” in the scriptures.

The angel of the LORD will also speak to Sarah in Genesis 17,  
Manoah and his wife in Judges 13,  
Zechariah and Elizabeth in Luke 1,  
and Mary and Joseph in Luke 1.

But the first birth announcement is given *not* for the chosen seed,  
but for the rejected Ishmaelites.

Ishmael means “God hears.”

*12 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.”*

Most commentators agree with this translation.

But literally, it reads “he shall dwell before the face of all his brethren”

It is certainly true that Ishmael was a wild donkey –

an aggressive streak runs throughout the Ishmaelites all their days.

But that does not mean that the whole of verse 12 must be a curse –

especially since the point of verses 10-12 is to pronounce a *blessing!*

It is true that the Ishmaelites will be a problem throughout Israel’s history.

Over and over again they will be an annoyance and a thorn in Israel’s side.

It will be Ishmaelite traders who sell Joseph into slavery in Egypt –

though they will also be called Midianite traders,

because the Ishmaelites and Midianites merge into one.

Which means also that when Moses marries the daughter of a priest of Midian,  
he marries someone connected to the Ishmaelites.

And this means that while Ishmael himself dwelt “against” his brethren,

there may well be a double-meaning in this phrase:

he will dwell in the face of all his brethren,

because there is a portion of Ishmael

that will be reconciled to the God of his Father.

[see 25:18 – for the death of Ishmael he settled “before the face” of all his people]

Why do I dwell on this?

Because it is important to see that God’s choice of Isaac  
does not mean that Ishmael is reprobate.

Salvation – the seed of the woman – will come through Sarai:

God’s covenant promises will be fulfilled through Sarai.

But that does not mean that Ishmael is damned.

After all, Hagar’s response to the LORD is that of faith:

*13 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.”*

*14 Therefore the well was called Beer-lahai-roi;*

*it lies between Kadesh and Bered.*

Even as Hagar is the only woman whom a deity addresses by name  
in ancient near eastern literature;

also, Hagar is the only person in the Old Testament who confers a name upon God.

In every other case God reveals his name.

But here Hagar names God:

you are the one who sees me

or

you are the one I see (either one would be accurate).

And Hagar’s explanation connects both parts:

“I have seen him who looks after me”

And with the blessing of the God-who-sees upon her  
she returned to her mistress.

### **3. The Birth of Ishmael (16:15-16)**

*15 And Hagar bore Abram a son,*

*and Abram called the name of his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael.*

*16 Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram.*

Verse 1 told us that Sarai has borne no children to Abram,  
but she has a servant named Hagar.

Verse 16 now tells us that Hagar has borne a son to Abram.

The plot thickens.

The suspense heightens.

God had made it clear in chapter 15 that *he* would fulfill his covenant.

“Don’t just do something, stand there!”



Abram tried to do something,  
and all he got for it was added conflict and chaos –  
which his descendants would endure for hundreds of years!

### **Conclusion**

I'd like to close by reflecting on what this passage teaches us  
about sex and the city of God.  
As we have seen, two cities emerge in the narrative:  
two types of building.

The seed of the serpent has been building the city of man:  
Cain builds the first city,  
Lamech's children develop culture,  
Nimrod builds cities,  
all culminating in the Tower of Babel.

Now in the narrative of Abraham, the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah  
typify the sort of lust, power and greed of the city of man.  
The Canaanites are just like Sodom and Gomorrah.

Meanwhile the seed of the woman has been building the city of God:  
but building the city of God begins with worship.

Abel brought the firstborn of his flock,  
Seth called upon the name of the LORD,  
Enoch and Noah walked with God.  
Noah and Abram built altars

But you cannot talk about these two cities without talking about sex.  
The book of Genesis – and especially the narrative of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob –  
is filled with stories about sex and power.  
This shouldn't surprise us.

God commanded Adam and Eve to be fruitful and multiply,  
to fill the earth and subdue it.  
And in the curse, the woman receives pain in childbearing.  
Her unique gift also becomes the focus of her unique suffering –  
and also the means by which God will bring redemption to the world,  
as the Seed of the Woman will crush the head of the serpent!

What does all this mean?

All this means that sex is at the center of the story of redemption.  
And this may explain why humanity has such a twisted view of sex.  
God's purpose was that through this beautiful act

humanity might be fruitful and multiply.  
But we have twisted it and perverted it.

We think that sex is something good in itself –  
something to be desired for its own sake –  
something that is even a basic human “right” (according to some).

Throughout Genesis we will keep coming back to this,  
because we will see that modern man is not so very different from ancient man.

God created sex as a means of promoting his glory –  
as a picture of the love that he has for his people.

But since the fall man has twisted sex  
and we have turned it into a means of promoting our own selfish desires.

And I’m not just talking about the world “out there.”  
I’m talking about you.  
I’m talking about me.

We forget that we are disordered.  
And we buy into our culture’s view that sex is a right.  
We forget that sex was created as a picture of worship.

We should think for a moment of two of the most common ways  
that scripture speaks about sex.

First, when a husband “knows” his wife,  
they are engaged in the most intimate act of fellowship.

But the word used here when it says that Abram “went in” to Hagar  
is a very ordinary Hebrew word used for going all sorts of places.  
But it is also the word used for when the priest goes in to the holy place.

There is a reason why the prophets will so regularly refer to idolatry  
as a form of spiritual adultery.

The marriage relation between a husband and wife  
is an intimate picture of the relationship between God and his people –  
between Christ and his bride, the church.

This is why marriage *is* a “holy estate” –  
it is a thing that is set apart.

You were created to reflect the holy worship of God in your sexuality.  
This means that every time you misuse your sexuality  
you are not only violating the seventh commandment

(you shall not commit adultery)  
you are also violating the first commandment  
(you shall have no other gods before me):  
when you dress provocatively  
(either to make men look – or to make women jealous),  
when you look at pornography,  
when you fantasize about sex,  
even when you use your spouse for your own selfish gratification!

The act of marriage, the sexual union of husband and wife,  
is designed to reflect the love of Christ and his bride,  
the love of God and his people.

There is no place for selfishness here.

You who are single may wonder, “what about me?”  
Even single people may express their sexuality in a holy manner!  
In my experience the self-control required *in* marriage is actually more difficult  
than the self-control required when I was single!  
You express your sexuality properly as a single person  
by devoting yourself wholeheartedly to the service of Christ.  
That includes being diligent in your service to your earthly masters –  
and if you desire to marry,  
then it means pursuing marriage in a holy manner.  
It means not giving yourself (your body or your heart)  
to someone who is not your spouse.

In your sexuality you are enacting a picture of worship.  
So be holy – even as God is holy.

And if your response to this is to say, “but how...?”  
remember that your God is the one who made the heavens and the earth,  
your God is the one who walked *alone* between the pieces of the sacrifice (Gen 15)  
your God is the one who has promised that he will accomplish your salvation.

Yes, you need to change –  
but there is nothing you can do to change yourself.  
You cannot “fix” your sexual problem any more than Sarai could fix hers!

The solution is not to *do* anything.  
Don’t just do something, stand there!  
Believe God’s promises in Jesus Christ, and it is done already!

Jesus died to take the guilt and curse of your sin upon himself.  
You are not called to “fix” yourself,  
you must simply repent and believe in the gospel.