

Genesis 16:1-16

Introduction

So far in these chapters of Genesis, *Abram* has taken centre-stage. He has received a wonderful promise from God. In chapter 12, God told him: **‘I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.’** And Abram’s learning to live by faith in that promise. In chapter 15, he expressed his doubts and insecurities to God. And God confirmed his promise through a covenant.

But here in chapter 16, it’s not Abram who takes centre-stage but two women: his wife, Sarai and her slave Hagar. As we work our way through this chapter, we’ll see that these two women display contrasting attitudes to God’s promises. And we’ll find plenty that we can learn from them about what it means to live by faith. So we’re going to look at them one at a time starting with Sarai.

Sarai

The chapter begins by highlighting an apparent problem. Verse 1. **Now Sarai, Abram’s wife, had borne him no children.**

God had promised Abram that his offspring would be as numerous as the dust of the earth and as uncountable as the stars in the sky. But after 10 years living in the promised land, there were still no children. And that was becoming a problem for Sarai. We can understand why. Infertility was an intensely painful experience, as it still is for many people today. In the ancient world especially, when so much importance was attached to continuing the family line, it was viewed as a sign of failure. And Sarai was not a young woman. Time was running out. And so was her patience.

When she says, in verse 2, that **‘The LORD has kept me from having children...’** she’s right. This was God’s doing. There’s nothing wrong with her theology at this point. She’s absolutely right about God’s sovereign control over the timing of her pregnancy. But she has misinterpreted the delay. God always does what he has promised. But he does it according to his own timetable, not ours. Abram and Sarai *would* have a child. But his birth, when it happened, would be at exactly the right time. It would be at the time of his choosing. But to Sarai, the delay signals that God’s promise is in doubt. So she decides to take matters into her own hands. I suspect we’ve all felt like doing that at some stage. We long for God to act in a particular way. And when it doesn’t happen, we find ways to give him a helping hand. For Sarai, that meant surrogacy. She has an Egyptian slave named Hagar. And she says to Abram, **‘Go, sleep with my slave; perhaps I can build a family through her.’**

No doubt, it seemed perfectly reasonable. It certainly wouldn't have been an unusual thing to do. It was common practice in the ancient world for infertile couples to use a slave as a surrogate. But there are plenty of details in the passage which emphasise that this was a bad idea.

It's all so reminiscent of what happened back in chapter 3. Just like Eve in the garden of Eden, who took the forbidden fruit and gave it to Adam, we're told that Sarai 'took' Hagar and 'gave' her to Abram. Just like Adam, Abram listens to his wife. Even though *he* is the one who has heard the words of God, he doesn't remind his wife of them, as he should have done. Rather, he follows her lead. He takes Hagar as a second wife. And verse 4 tells us that: **He slept with Hagar and she conceived.**

This was the news they were waiting for. The plan had worked. But we're meant to see that this is a re-run of the fall. And as in the garden of Eden, it's a disaster. As in the garden, Abram and Sarai's actions bring trouble and regret. And sin multiplies. Now that Hagar's pregnant, it's become clear to everyone that Sarai's infertility was not down to Abram but her. She's humiliated. And Hagar's social standing is transformed. She becomes proud and holds her mistress in contempt. And Sarai soon views Hagar as a threat. Even though the plan had been her own she blames Abram. And she looks to Abram to put Hagar in her place. But now Abram doesn't want anything to do with her. He's not interested. And he tells Sarai to deal with Hagar herself. Which she does. She ill-treats Hagar, who flees. It's a word that's used to describe someone who's running for their life. That's how serious this is. It's an appalling situation in which everyone loses. Sarai loses her slave. Hagar loses her home. Abram loses his second wife and his unborn child.

This is what happens when we try to manipulate our circumstances rather than trusting and obeying God. Waiting on the Lord is one of the great themes of the Bible. He has promised good to all his people, if only we will wait on him. Yet we're in such a hurry. In the days of Amazon Prime and Deliveroo, we expect everything to happen immediately. And when we discover that God's timetable is not our own, we wonder whether we should be doing something to help things along. When he doesn't do what we had hoped he would do, we wonder whether we should intervene. A little nudge here. A helping hand there. Waiting is so hard. I know that I can be just like Sarai.

What her story's exposing is the ongoing battle we all experience as Christians with the flesh. If you want to know what the flesh is, knock the 'h' off the end and read it backwards. It's the self. It's doing things my way, to get the result I want, for my own pleasure and satisfaction. We all experience it. I can make the most reasonable and persuasive arguments for going my own way rather than God's. The apostle Paul describes it as the daily battle between the flesh and the Spirit of God who dwells in our hearts.

As we wait on the Lord, we need to learn to walk in step with the Spirit rather than listening to the schemes of the flesh. When waiting is hard, as it was for Sarai, we need to call out to

God in prayer. We need to tell him how hard we're finding it. We can tell him how much we're struggling. We can be honest with him. And we need to ask him to provide the resources we need for the situation we're in. That's how we learn to depend on him, rather than taking matters into our own hands and relying on our own ingenuity. And that's where Hagar's example can encourage us.

So secondly, let's consider Hagar.

Hagar

She's on the run, heading back home to Egypt. And then we're told, in verse 7: **The angel of the LORD found Hagar near a spring in the desert; it was the spring that is beside the road to Shur. And he said, 'Hagar, slave of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going?'**

'I'm running away from my mistress Sarai,' she answered.

Then the angel of the LORD told her, 'Go back to your mistress and submit to her.'

What a difficult command to hear. She's fleeing from a woman whose actions are threatening her life. And God tells her to go back and submit to her.

How hard it must have been even to consider doing that. Yet isn't that often our experience as well. We turn to God in prayer, perhaps in desperation, and we sense him telling us the opposite of what we want to hear. We want him to tell us we've made good choices. We're doing the right thing and going the right way. But instead, there are times when he tells us to stop, turn around, and go back. It's the last thing we want to hear, and we may not understand it. But it's always the route to blessing. Letting God's word shape our lives, rather than letting our own desires and ingenuity be in the driving seat, is always the best way to live. And that's always true, no matter how unwelcome the things he says when we first hear them. The danger is that we stop listening. We put our fingers in our ears and refuse to hear him. But if we will listen, we can be certain that he will provide the resources we need to do what he tells us. And he does that for Hagar through a promise. Look at verse 10.

The angel added, 'I will increase your descendants so much that they will be too numerous to count.'

The angel of the LORD also said to her: 'You are now pregnant and you will give birth to a son. You shall name him Ishmael, for the LORD has heard of your misery. He will 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.'

Hagar will have descendants that are too numerous to count. It's like God's promise to Abram... that his offspring would be as numerous as the dust of the earth and as uncountable as the stars in the sky.

The name she's to give to the son she's carrying is to be a constant reminder that God has heard her anguish. Ishmael means, 'God hears'. Yet the description that follows is very odd indeed. He will live in constant hostility towards others, especially towards the descendants that God would bring about through Abram and Sarai. Clearly, this isn't the son through whom God would bring blessing to people of all nations. Despite Sarai's scheming, this isn't the promised seed of Abram. Nonetheless, verse 13 is lovely.

She gave this name to the LORD who spoke to her: 'You are the God who sees me,' for she said, 'I have now seen the One who sees me.'

Finally, Hagar has been seen.

Up until now, no one has seen her. No one asked Hagar how *she* felt about Sarai's plan. No one asked how she felt about sleeping with Abram and becoming his second wife. No one asked how she felt about carrying his baby. No one asked how she felt about handing over that baby to Sarai once it was born. No one asked how she felt about any of it. Her feelings were unimportant. To be crude, all that Abram and Sarai were interested in was her womb. Hagar herself was invisible. But now, finally, she's been seen. **'You are the God who sees me,'** she says.

God's cares about the afflicted. No matter how hard our circumstances, or how painful our experiences, whether at home or at work or at school, we are never beyond God's care.

You may feel invisible to those around you. You may feel as though your feelings and your opinions don't matter. But you're not invisible to God. He sees you. He understands what you're going through. And he cares. Whatever you're going through at the moment, he wouldn't let it be happening to you if it didn't serve his good purpose for your life. You may not be able to understand how that can be true. You may not be able to understand how the things that are happening to you now could possibly be for your good. But one day you will. He is the God who sees you. And it's the knowledge of his care for us that enables us to face the circumstances he places us in, when our instinct is to flee from them.

Hagar went back and submitted. She returns to Abram in the knowledge that God was watching over her. And we're told in verse 15: **So Hagar bore Abram a son, and Abram gave the Ishmael to the son she had borne. Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore him Ishmael.**

There's nothing to suggest in these verses that it was easy. There's nothing to suggest that Sarai was any friendlier. But Hagar went back and submitted, because she trusted that God was watching over her.

Conclusion

Here are two very different responses to difficult circumstances.

Sarai tried to change her circumstances through her own ingenuity, because she didn't trust God to keep his promises. She tried to have the life she wanted by taking matters into her own hands, rather than trusting God to give her the life he willed.

Hagar, on the other hand, knew that God saw her circumstances and trusted him to care for her in them. They were not the circumstances she would have chosen, that's clear. But she committed herself to God's care and trusted him to watch over her.

Well, we need to be very careful how we apply these lessons to our own circumstances. As a church, we need to think carefully about how we protect and care for people who are in difficult circumstances, especially if they are in danger. But, nonetheless, we need to allow ourselves to feel the challenge of these verses. We must ask ourselves, which of these two attitudes is most like my own, in the circumstances I face.

Am I living according to the flesh, trusting my own ingenuity rather than depending on God's promises? There will be some here who are doing exactly that, trying to give God a helping hand yet paying no attention to his will. Sarai's story couldn't be any clearer about how that will end. Please hear the warning before it's too late.

Or am I living by faith, trusting that God is working for my good, even in circumstances that I wouldn't choose? There will be some here who are trusting God in unbearable circumstances, who are casting themselves on him day after day in prayer, crying out to him for help. Let Hagar's story encourage you. God sees you. He understands. And he cares. Keep trusting him, and he will provide all you need to keep going.

We must never doubt that God will fulfil every one of his promises to us, even when we don't understand how. And we must never believe that we are beyond his care, no matter how hard or painful our circumstances are. Our God is the God who sees. He knows what we're going through. He understands what we're feeling. And he cares. What he asks of us is to trust him.

Let's pray.

Loving Father, thank you that you see us in the circumstances we're in. Thank you that you know what we're going through, you understand, and you care. Sometimes it's really hard, when life isn't the way we want it to be. But please help us to keep trusting you and waiting on you to fulfil all your good promises to us. Please give us the strength we need to keep living by faith. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.