

Pushing Ahead When God Seems Too Slow

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Genesis 16
Rev. Rich deLange

Dear Congregation,

I love Abram. I can relate to him so much. Looking back on the life of Abram up to this point, it's safe to say that he has been tested and found wanting. He's failed to trust God at different points, particularly the time in Egypt back in chapter 12 when he called Sarah his sister instead of his wife in order to protect his own life. But through it all, his faith is growing.

Abram and Sarai are now awaiting the fulfillment of God's promise to give them a child, their heir, the child of the covenant. We remember from chapter 15 that God made a covenant with Abram in which God alone passed between the pieces of the sacrifice, indicating that this was His promise to Abram and He was going to fulfill it.

From the time God called Abram to leave his family and country, Abram has had to learn time and again to let go of his own understanding and to trust God. Even at the age of 90, he is still learning. And so are Sarah and Hagar. The promises of God sometimes seem slow in coming, don't they? But God is a God of His word. He does what He promises.

The story begins with the narrator telling us, "Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children." About ten years have passed since God first promised Abram a son and still Abram and Sarai are waiting! Who of us would not become impatient if we were in their sandals? We must not be too quick to dump on Sarai for her impatience. She's 80 years old! The fertility window is closed. The writer of Hebrews 11 talks about the age of Abram and the miracle of children from them. He says,

Heb 11:12 And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore.

Sarai was only 10 years younger than Abraham. And she knew that nothing but a miracle would allow her to become a mother. So she got to thinking, "Well, God promised Abram the son. He never said I had to be the mother." A light went on. She said, "Abram, why don't you take my servant Hagar to be your second wife and I will call the child that she bears my own. I can build my family through her! It will work. God never said that I would bear the promised child. He only said you would be the father! Since He has kept my womb closed for the past ten years, He must want us to have a child some other way. So go ahead, take my servant Hagar and get her pregnant. I've seen plenty other couples do it that way. That will get rid of our shame of childlessness and we can get on building up the family that God promised would come from your line. So, what do you say, Honey? Why don't we? That way you can have your promised heir and I can have my baby!"

I don't know what Abram did. Maybe he leaned on his staff to think about it for a while, lowered his glasses, rubbed his beard and looked at Sarah in disbelief. Maybe he slept on the idea for a few nights. In the end, though, he agreed to Sarah's plan. She

must be right. He had given God ten years and still nothing was happening. Now must be the time! Sarah's plan was worth a try! He could have even reasoned that the plan was so well thought out that it had to be from the Lord Himself.

You see, Sarah's plan for Abraham to have a child through Hagar sounded good. It was easy for Sarah to justify it as a plan that God would approve of. It's easy to let our own agenda direct our steps but we need to listen to God. A few months later Sarah begins to smell a rat! Hagar gets pregnant and begins to proudly look down on Sarah. Maybe she said things to her like, "I guess you won't be Abram's number one wife anymore." But whatever it was, Sarah realizes that her great idea has gone amuck and she starts blaming Abram for all the problems. The Hebrew original makes it clear that she accuses Hagar of doing violence to her by retaliating. Sarai is beside herself with anger and finally blurts out a kind of curse to Abram.

Gen 16:5 Then Sarai said to Abram, "You are responsible for the wrong I am suffering. I put my servant in your arms, and now that she knows she is pregnant, she despises me. May the LORD judge between you and me."

Particularly in those final words she makes herself look like the righteous by-stander or victim.

Abram, caught in the middle, wants to assure Sarai that she is still his number one wife. So he tells her that she can do with Hagar whatever she would like. And Sarai proceeds to make life so miserable for Hagar that Hagar runs away!

That's where Part 1 of the story closes. The family of the covenant head is in shambles. They thought life was rough waiting for the Lord to deliver on His promise. But now things are really messy. Hagar has lost her home. Sarai has lost her long-time maid who, no doubt, over the years had become a dear member of the family. And with Hagar gone, Abram has lost what he was thinking was the "promised" son.

Over all this sits God, watching the events unfold. No doubt wishing His children had consulted Him before taking such strange action and making such a mess of their lives. At the end of Part 1, Abram and Sarai are alone, no farther ahead than they were ten years earlier. And Hagar is alone in the wilderness.

Do you wonder what God thinks about this mess?

Abram and Sarai were guilty of faithlessness. How could they even suspect that the Lord who had rescued them from the hand of Pharaoh in ch.12 and who blessed them each time they obeyed Him, would approve of their plan? After all that they had been through with God, how could they doubt His promise? How could they proceed with their plans for Hagar without even asking God? They had become impatient. They weren't proceeding with their plan out of faith. "Impatience in awaiting the fulfillment of the Lord's promise amounts to [a form of] unbelief." (DeGraaf, I, 102). That's what happens when we don't listen to God or, even worse, when you don't even ask God! Or put another way, that's what happens when we get impatient with God and try to help Him out!

Abram is a man of God. Sarai is a woman of God. They know His faithfulness. And, yes, God has been keeping them waiting. He does that to His children more often.

But waiting is not a sign that God wants us to take matters into our own hands. Surely, Abram knew that! He and Sarai certainly should have known that God would make good on His promise.

Hagar was not entirely innocent either. She had some of her own sin to deal with. She obviously didn't appreciate what she was running away from. Sure enough, Sarai was making life very difficult for her but what about her connection to Abram? What about the child she was carrying? This baby was Abram's too. And surely Hagar knew that this child was supposed to be the answer to God's promise. Didn't that mean anything to her? Didn't God and His covenant mean anything to her? Was she ready to leave the Lord and His blessings behind and rob her son of what would possibly be a privileged position in the family of God?

There seemed to be a lot of faithlessness around. As a result, things got pretty messy. So what would God do now?

Well, God takes action. The covenant family is falling apart. God must act. Because of the covenant God made to Abram, He goes after Hagar. She has become part of the covenant family by virtue of her connection to Abram and Sarai. And her child is a covenant child. "For the sake of Abram, with whom He had entered into a covenant, He did not want to forsake Hagar and the child." (103). Indeed, when it comes to the covenant, God takes His promises seriously. He does not quickly forsake anyone who belongs to Him. That is comforting. And we see it played out before our eyes in Genesis 16 as God goes after Hagar and her son because of His promise to Abram.

God, in the person of an angel, comes after Hagar and finds her at a spring in the desert. She is running from Canaan and heading back to Egypt, the land of her birth. But God will not let her go so easily. You can hardly miss the similarities between this passage and Genesis 3. When Adam and Eve sinned, they tried to run from God and God came and said, "Where are you?" Now He comes to Hagar who is running away with pretty much the same question?

Gen 16:8 And he said, "Hagar, servant of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going?"

Hagar tells him that she is a runaway slave from her mistress Sarah. And the Hebrew word for "runaway" indicates that she had good reasons for doing so.

But her reasons don't seem to win much sympathy from God, at least not at first glance. God sounds so harsh in sending Hagar back to a Sarai. In fact, He doesn't just say, "Return to Sarai," but this:

Gen 16:9 ..."Go back to your mistress and submit to her."

Paul's words from Ephesians come to mind where he introduces a section on family, including slave-master relations, by saying,

Eph 5:21 Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

When you and I belong to Jesus Christ, our grateful response ought to be one of submission to those the Lord has put over us. We become servants to all people and our worth is measured in our relationship to Christ, not in the positions we hold in this world.

The Lord is not endorsing Sarai's harsh treatment of Hagar or slave ownership as something normative or good, but He is pointing out to Hagar that what she has left behind is worth returning to. She may suffer some injustice, but it would be better to endure that than to turn her back on the covenant promises of God. The problem with Hagar, as it is with all of us so often, is that we want the blessings of God, but not the hardships that might come along with it. We expect that we should "be carried to the sky on flowery beds of ease," as one hymn puts it. But recall Jesus words in Matthew

Mt 16:24 ...to his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. ²⁵ For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it.

How much like Hagar are we?

Hagar did not appreciate the blessings of God and His promise to Abram and his family. Rather than think only of herself and her desire to have that child in her womb all to herself, she ought to have been willing to sacrifice everything to retain that special relationship with the Lord for herself and her son. The Lord would comfort her in the times when she suffered injustice.

Congregation, sometimes we also may have to suffer injustice, "but what we suffer must never lead us to cut our ties with the Lord by turning our backs" on Him, on His people or His Church (cf. 104). We have much more to gain by sticking with Jesus, than we have by running away.

And the angel of the Lord makes that clear to Hagar as he continues to speak to her. He comes with another promise from God that reinforces the blessings of being in covenant with Him.

Gen 16:10 The angel [said], "I will so increase your descendants that they will be too numerous to count."

That's the same promise God gave to Abram when He first called him.

In running away, Hagar acted without faith in or understanding of God's promises. But God reminds her through His angel that He stands by His covenant promises and even though this plan of Abram and Sarai is not what God had in mind, He still sticks by His covenant. He hears the cries of injustice that are raised by Hagar who also belongs to God's family. Sarai selfishly chased Hagar away. And Abram wrongly allowed it. But God saw and heard it all! And He comes to Hagar's aid.

God promises Hagar that she will bear a son whom she must name *Ishmael* which means "God hears." The name Ishmael is as much a reminder to Hagar that God hears the injustice she suffers as it is to Abram and Sarai that God hears what injustice they committed! Injustice has absolutely no place in the covenant family. Injustice displeases God most when His own people treat each other unjustly. The covenant community ought to be a just and safe place. The covenant community is supposed to provide a secure environment within which Christians nurture, strengthen and help one another. That's one of the emphases in the Lord's Supper too—we are united together in Christ. We are one. And, as such, we help, comfort and strengthen each other with the grace of Christ that helps, comforts and strengthens us.

Obviously, Abram and Sarai had not lived up to God's design. And Ishmael would be a living reminder to them of that. God's words to Hagar indicates that Ishmael would also be a man with an unquenchable desire for freedom. But how would he use that freedom? To bring glory to God or to himself? Would he enjoy the blessings of the covenant, or use the freedom God gave him to advance his own name? And that is, of course, a question for every person who is privileged to have membership in the covenant, which includes the greatest freedom possible which comes from Christ.

Look at Hagar's response to God. Something quite amazing happens. Hagar, we must remember, has been with Abram and Sarai many years. She, like all of us, had heard repeatedly of the Lord God and His promises, but it seems that she never fully understood or knew God through it all. In the desert, when the Lord comes to her as an angel, she realizes how glorious it is to walk with the Lord in a covenant relationship. Genesis tells us,

Gen 16:13 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." ¹⁴ That is why the well was called Beer Lahai Roi...

which means "Well of the living One who sees me." Only in a time of desperation does Hagar finally see that God cares for her. Only when the chips are down does she see the Lord's hand. And then she obeys the Lord and returns to Sarai and Abram.

And what do we learn?

We see that Sarai, in trying to speed up the plan of God, gained nothing but hardship. She ended up waiting still 14 more years for Isaac to be born. Hasty action on our part when it does not spring forth from faith does not forward the plan of God. We must wait upon the Lord.

We see how gracious God is, as well, to forgive our sins because of Jesus. As we look at Hagar's life we learn that the Lord, because of His covenant, comes to us in very powerful ways at those times when we are hurting. I can testify to that personally over the last 5 months. The truth is that God is always present. He is always with us in every situation of our lives. Yet so often we just don't pay attention until a crisis arises. So often Christians who are struggling say that they have never experienced the nearness of God more sweetly. I agree.

We have a faithful God. We have a God we can trust. A God we must consult regularly before making hasty and possibly harmful choices in our lives. Pushing ahead with our own agenda when God seems too slow is not the answer. Our God leads and guides us. We do well to take the words of the proverb to heart:

Prov 3:5 "Trust in the Lord with all your heart. Lean not on your own understanding.

⁶ In all your ways acknowledge the Lord and He will make your paths straight!"

We cannot do better than God. We do best to follow His wise paths and trust Him, knowing that He truly does care for everyone of us because of Jesus, our new covenant head.