

GENESIS 16 – HAGAR AND THE BIRTH OF ISHMAEL

A. Sarai gives her servant girl Hagar to Abram.

1. (1-2) Sarai proposes a child for Abram through Hagar.

Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no *children*. And she had an Egyptian maidservant whose name was Hagar. So Sarai said to Abram, "See now, the LORD has restrained me from bearing *children*. Please, go in to my maid; perhaps I shall obtain children by her." And Abram heeded the voice of Sarai.

a. **Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children:** Many years before this, God promised Abram that he would have many descendants ([Genesis 12:2](#)). To this point, he had **no children through** his wife Sarai.

b. **She had an Egyptian maidservant:** Hagar was almost certainly part of what Abram received during his time in Egypt ([Genesis 12:16](#)).

i. "Very likely Hagar was one of the slaves given to him by Pharaoh when he dismissed him and Sarah; and you know what trouble Hagar brought into the family. If Abraham had lived the separated life, and had not fallen into the customs of those round about him, he would not have had that sin and sorrow concerning Hagar; nor would he have had that righteous rebuke from Abimelech, the king of Gerar, when again he had acted deceitfully with regard to his wife." (Spurgeon)

c. **See now, the LORD has restrained me from bearing children:** Sarai understood that God was sovereign over the womb. He had promised descendants to Abram and Sarai, and they had not yet come after many years.

There was a lot of pain in these words.

- The pain of hope deferred making the heart sick ([Proverbs 13:12](#)).
- The pain of prayers not yet answered.
- The pain of arms that had never yet held her own child.
- The pain of public shame.

· The pain of blaming God for one's problems; unbelief is a sin, but it is also a sickness, one that carries a lot of pain.

d. **Please, go in to my maid; perhaps I shall obtain children by her:** Sarai encouraged Abram to take part in what was, in that day, essentially a surrogate mother arrangement. According to custom, the child would be considered to be the child of Abram and Sarai, not Abram and Hagar.

i. Sarai could justify this as a way to fulfill God's promise. "Abram, God promised that you would be the father of many nations and He didn't specifically mention me. Maybe you're the father of many nations, but I'm not the mother."

ii. Nevertheless, this was against God's will for many reasons.

· It was a sin of unbelief in God and His promise: Sarai believed in God's sovereignty over the womb, then acted against it.

· It was a sin against God's plan for marriage: that one man and one woman come together in a one-flesh relationship.

· It was a sin against Abram and Sarai's marriage: this surrogacy wasn't done in a doctor's office, but in a bedroom.

e. **And Abram heeded the voice of Sarai:** Sarai wasn't the first woman to be tormented by the thought, *maybe my husband would be better off with someone else*. It was bad for Sarai to hold on to that thought; it was *much worse* for Abram to heed the voice of Sarai on this matter.

i. A godly Christian wife has a lot of wisdom for her husband, and many husbands learn the value of listening to the wisdom of their wives. Yet no wife is infallible, and Abram was responsible for his sin of heeding the unwise, unbelief-based advice of his wife.

ii. Abram should have said something like this: "Sarai, bless your heart – but *you're* my wife and we're in this together. Difficult as it is, let's believe God all over again for a miracle. I don't want to sin against God and our marriage with this Egyptian servant girl."

iii. Ginzberg quotes a Jewish tradition, saying that before they came to live in the Promised Land, Abram and Sarai regarded their childlessness as punishment for not living in the land. But now they were in the land for ten years, and they still had no

children. Sarai probably felt it was time to do something. Perhaps she thought along the lines of an old (unbiblical) proverb, “God helps those who help themselves.”

2. (3-4) Abram agrees with Sarai’s suggestion.

Then Sarai, Abram’s wife, took Hagar her maid, the Egyptian, and gave her to her husband Abram to be his wife, after Abram had dwelt ten years in the land of Canaan. So he went in to Hagar, and she conceived. And when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress became despised in her eyes.

a. **Sarai, Abram’s wife, took Hagar her maid, the Egyptian, and gave her to her husband Abram to be his wife:** They each acted according to unbelief. Abram did not actually marry Hagar, but he acted towards her as a man should only act towards his wife.

b. **After Abram dwelt ten years in the land:** It had been more than **ten years** since the promise was made regarding Abram’s descendants. By most accounts, **ten years** seems like a long time to wait for the promise of God.

i. The whole practice of surrogate parentage was somewhat common in the ancient world and may have been acceptable to God on other occasions; but it wasn’t for Abram, the friend of God and the man of faith. God had a different path for him.

ii. Abram and Sarai were discouraged enough that they approached the problem of no children by leaving God out of the matter. It was as if they said, “*With God out of the equation, how do we solve this?*” This was wrong for many reasons.

- God is never out of the equation.

- Men and women of faith must walk in faith – not in unbelief.

- Men and women of faith must see seeing things in the realm of the spirit, not only in the material world.

iii. The long wait for the promise discouraged them and made them vulnerable to acting in the flesh. Yet even after this, it would still be more than 13 years until the child of promise came.

iv. When we impatiently try to fulfill God’s promises in our own effort, it accomplishes nothing and may even prolong the time until the promise is fulfilled. Jacob had to live as

an exile for 25 years, because he thought he had to arrange the fulfillment of God's promise to get his father's blessing. Moses had to tend sheep for 40 years in the desert after he tried to arrange the fulfillment of God's promise by murdering an Egyptian.

v. It is much better to receive God's help than to try and help Him with our own wisdom and even unbelief. "Those who are truly zealous for God frequently reach for fruit without first dying. Unfortunately much Christian work is done in this way, and while there is conception, the child that is born can never be the heir. Christian work that is done merely through the zeal of human effort without counting the body as dead, and Sarai as good as dead, may produce great revival campaigns with but a few genuinely saved, large church memberships with many tares among the wheat" (Barnhouse).

c. **So he went in to Hagar, and she conceived:** Abram certainly acted according to his own power and wisdom when he agreed to inseminate Hagar and did not trust in God's ability to provide an heir through Sarai. But this wasn't a matter of a sensual romance. According to some of the customs of the day, Hagar would actually sit on the lap of Sarai as Abram inseminated her, to show that the child would legally belong to Sarai, as Hagar was merely a substitute for Sarai.

i. We understand this from the similar occasion of using a servant as a surrogate mother in the case of Rachel's giving of Bilhah to Jacob when Rachel was barren. In that context, [Genesis 30:3](#) reads: *So she said, "Here is my maid Bilhah; go in to her, and she will bear a child on my knees, that I also may have children by her."*

ii. The phrase "bear a child on my knees" refers to the ancient practice of surrogate-adoption. Some believe that the phrase refers only to a symbolic placement of the child on the knees of one who adopts it. Others believe that it refers to the surrogate sitting on the lap of the adoptive mother during both insemination and birth. For example, referring to [Genesis 30:3](#), the Twentieth Century Bible Commentary says: "These words are probably intended literally, and not merely as figurative adoption."

iii. We should not regard the idea that Hagar was inseminated and gave birth "on the knees" of Sarai as a certainty – we don't know enough about the ancient practice, and even if it were an ancient custom, it doesn't mean that it was followed in every case. But it certainly is a reasonable possibility.

d. **And she conceived:** From Sarai's perspective, a terrible thing happened – Abram succeeded in making Hagar pregnant. This proved beyond all doubt the failure to provide a son to Abram was the fault of Sarai, not her husband. In a culture that so

highly valued childbearing, mothering the child of a wealthy and influential man like Abram gave a servant girl like Hagar greater status, and made her appear more blessed than Sarai.

i. This is a good reminder that *results* are not enough to justify what we do before God. It's not right to say, "Well, they got a baby out of it. It must have been God's will." The flesh profits nothing ([John 6:63](#)), but it can *produce* something. Doing things in the flesh may get results, and we may be sorry we got them.

ii. Whatever a man or woman attempts to do without God will be a miserable failure – or an even more miserable success.

e. **When she saw that she had conceived, her mistress became despised in her eyes:** Hagar immediately began to think of herself as better and greater than Sarai. A bad situation became worse.

3. (5-6) Sarai's anger towards Hagar.

Then Sarai said to Abram, "My wrong be upon you! I gave my maid into your embrace; and when she saw that she had conceived, I became despised in her eyes. The LORD judge between you and me." So Abram said to Sarai, "Indeed your maid is in your hand; do to her as you please." And when Sarai dealt harshly with her, she fled from her presence.

a. **My wrong be upon you:** Sarai blamed the whole situation on Abram, and for good cause. He should have acted as the spiritual leader and told his wife that God was able to perform what He promised, and they didn't need to try to perform God's promise by disobeying Him and relying on man's strength and wisdom.

b. **I became despised in her eyes:** Hagar's contempt for Sarai started the problem. She couldn't resist displaying an inappropriate haughtiness, thinking her pregnancy somehow showed her to be better than Sarai.

c. **Indeed your maid is in your hand; do to her as you please:** Abram seemed to make a bad situation worse by turning the situation over to Sarai and not taking care of the child he was father to. Yet in this, he also put his relationship with Sarai first, and that was good.

- The **Angel of the LORD** would later appear to Abraham (Genesis 22).
- The **Angel of the LORD** would later appear to Moses (Exodus 3).
- The **Angel of the LORD** would later appear to Balaam (Numbers 22).
- The **Angel of the LORD** would later appear to Israel collectively (Judges 2).
- The **Angel of the LORD** would later appear to Gideon (Judges 6).
- The **Angel of the LORD** would later appear to Samson's parents (Judges 13).
- The **Angel of the LORD** would later appear to David (2 Samuel 24).
- The **Angel of the LORD** would later appear to Elijah (1 Kings 19).

iii. *This is the first appearance of the Angel of the LORD in the Bible. He didn't first appear to Noah or Enoch or Abram. The Angel of the LORD first appeared to a single mother-to-be who had a pride problem and was mistreated by the woman who put her into the whole mess.*

iv. All this makes us amazed at God's love for the unlikely, and we should never forget that He often delights in doing this.

c. **Where have you come from, and where are you going:** The **Angel of the LORD** asked an important and insightful question. In Hagar's pride and misery, she acted without thinking, "Where have I come from?" "Where am I going?"

i. Remembering those two questions would save us from a lot of trouble.

ii. Hagar thought she knew: *I come from the most terrible place ever. I'm going nowhere.* The Angel of the LORD told her, I've got a plan for you – let's move forward on it.

d. **Return to your mistress, and submit yourself under her hand:** The Angel of the Lord told her to *repent*. If she changed her direction, there was an inherent promise – *obey Me and I will protect you*. Jesus didn't exactly tell Hagar to go back to an abusive household; He made an implied promise of protection.

2. (10-12) The promise of the Angel of the LORD to Hagar.

Then the Angel of the LORD said to her, "I will multiply your descendants exceedingly, so that they shall not be counted for multitude." And the Angel of the LORD said to her:

**“Behold, you *are* with child,
And you shall bear a son.
You shall call his name Ishmael,
Because the LORD has heard your affliction.
He shall be a wild man;
His hand *shall be* against every man,
And every man’s hand against him.
And he shall dwell in the presence of all his brethren.”**

a. I will multiply your descendants exceedingly: God not only implied a promise of protection, He also gave a clear promise of staggering blessing. The unborn son of Hagar would be the father of uncountable descendants.

i. As the promise was fulfilled, Ishmael became the ancestor of the Arab people, just as his later half-brother Isaac would become the ancestor of the Jewish people.

ii. This makes the conflict between Arab and Jew even more tragic: *they are brothers* and share a common father in Abraham.

b. You shall call his name Ishmael: Ishmael was given a great promise, not only in the number of his descendants, but also in that he was the first one in the Bible given his name before he was born. *God had a plan for this boy and his descendants.* God doesn’t give a name if He doesn’t have a plan.

i. Many Christians today think they know God’s plan for the **descendants of Ishmael**, the Arabic people: God wants to wipe them out because of their hatred of Jews and their persecution of Christians. This reaction is not rooted in the Bible, especially in this passage of [Genesis 16](#). Consider:

· God could have allowed Hagar and her unborn child to die in the wilderness – He didn’t allow it. God specifically intervened so that wouldn’t happen.

· God could have allowed Hagar to live, but to disappear from the life and household of Abraham and Sarah, but He didn’t allow that.

· One may argue that Ishmael’s conception was because of sin and unbelief; but God could have erased him from the story, and *God chose not to*. This part of the story is God’s doing, not man’s doing.

· God *specifically* commanded Hagar to go back, to stay in the story. We can know that God's story for the Arabic people is not finished.

ii. We should also remember that angelic visitations, Jesus visitations, continue to this day among the descendants of Ishmael. The Angel of the LORD was not done visiting Ishmael.

c. **You shall call his name Ishmael, because the LORD has heard your affliction:** The name Ishmael means *God will hear*. We may take this as a prompting to pray for revival and spiritual awakening among the Arab peoples, because when they cry out to Jesus, *God will hear*.

d. **He shall be a wild man; his hand shall be against every man, and every man's hand against him:** The life of Hagar's son would not be easy, but God would still look over him and sustain him.

i. Remember that the ill effect of this – **a wild man, his hand shall be against every man, every man's hand against him** – has been mostly seen in violence and murder among Arabs themselves. They kill each other even more than they kill Jews and Christians. For their own sake, even more than ours, we pray: *God, bring salvation to the Arab people*.

3. (13-16) **God's blessing and protection of Hagar and Ishmael.**

Then she called the name of the LORD who spoke to her, You-Are-the-God-Who-Sees; for she said, "Have I also here seen Him who sees me?" Therefore the well was called Beer Lahai Roi; observe, it is between Kadesh and Bered. So Hagar bore Abram a son; and Abram named his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram.

a. **You-Are-the-God-Who-Sees:** Hagar knew this was no mere angel who appeared to her. The Angel of the LORD was also **the-God-Who-Sees**, the same One watching over Hagar and the yet-to-be-born Ishmael.

i. After meeting with *El Roi* (**You-Are-the-God-Who-Sees**), Hagar knew that if God could be with her in the wilderness, He would be with her in having to submit to Sarai also. It's as if Hagar said to God, "You have looked upon me, and now I can look upon You." That face-to-face relationship with God transforms.

b. **So Hagar bore Abram a son:** Apparently, Hagar did return with a submitted heart. She told the whole story to Abram and Sarai, and Abram named the child **Ishmael**, just as instructed in the meeting with the Angel of the LORD Hagar described.

i. Hagar might have said when she returned, “I fled from you all because I was so miserable and thought I could not continue here. But the LORD met me and told me He would see me through. He told me to come back and submit to you, so that is why I’m here.”

ii. Hagar thought her circumstances needed transformation; in fact, *she* needed transformation. “If we seek to change our circumstances, we will jump from the frying pan into the fire. We must be triumphant exactly where we are. It is not a change of climate we need, but a change of heart. The flesh wants to run away, but God wants to demonstrate His power exactly where we have known our greatest chagrin” (Barnhouse).

iii. Christians today have an even more clear and wonderful promise of this than Hagar ever had. We have the promise of Jesus: *Behold, I am with you always, even unto the end of the age* ([Matthew 28:20](#)).

- If you have to submit in difficult circumstances, *God sees*.
- If you ache under the pain of ministry, *God sees*.
- If you just feel like running, *God sees*.

- God has met you, sent Jesus near, and gives you new hope.