

“When Waiting Seems Impossible?”

Genesis 16

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“It seemed like a good idea at the time.” Have you ever said that? Tried something that just totally backfired? “I can’t believe how stupid I was and how much pain I caused a whole lot of people.”

Let me tell you what happened:

“You know my wife Sarai, don’t you? Well then you know she is one strong woman. She’s had to be, to put up with me. First she was willing to move from her hometown of Ur north to Haran with me. Then even more difficult for her, I eventually asked her to leave Haran and all our family and move to this part of the world. Canaan isn’t exactly the center of the universe. It has changed a lot since we first settle here. There wasn’t a soul here we knew except Lot who came with us.

Not long after we got here things around here dried up, literally – a drought - and we had to move again. We went to Egypt. Things were going okay down there until the King got a look at Sarai (she’s a beautiful woman) and he wanted her for his wife. At that point, I blew it “big time.” I asked Sarai if she would claim to be my sister so they wouldn’t kill me in order to get her. Would you believe she did it? Would you believe I asked her to do it? The pressure was pretty intense – I couldn’t help but think that being separated from Sarai was better than being dead. But in the effort to save my own skin, I hadn’t factored in God.

I’ll never forget the day God came to me in Haran. It couldn’t have been clearer – there was no mistake about it – God was calling me to go to Canaan. And He said just as clearly that he would give Sarai and me a family that would become great in number and significant in changing the world. I’ve known for a long time that Sarai couldn’t have a child – I knew that before we left Ur. But when I heard God’s direction and promise so clearly, I thought God would do the miraculous and Sarai and I would have children. God said I would have the land of Canaan and I would have a large family of my own.

But there I was in Egypt and I'd given my wife away to another man. You talk about messing up God's plan – I had done it.

Well you know what happened – God got the attention of that pagan king. When God couldn't get me, a believer, to listen – he had to work through some pagan. Subsequently, the king did the unbelievable – he gave Sarai back to me, allowed me to keep all my property and let us go.

I didn't trust God enough to stand up to that king in the first place and say Sarai wasn't available because God had plans for Sarai and me. Instead I "blew it" God had to show me that he was able to do the even more incredible thing – get the king to change his mind. You'd have thought I would have learned.

But back to Sarai, I said she is one strong woman. She went through all of that with me. She hung in there with me when I allowed our nephew Lot to take the best land in the region. She wasn't present, but she believed me, when I told her how God had come again to reassure me that we would have children. She waited through the weeks I was gone chasing after Lot to rescue him from the kings who had raided Canaan. She didn't know if I'd make it back alive. She believed me, a couple of years ago, when I told her how God came to me again and reassured me that my servants wouldn't be our heirs but that we would have a son of our own. I told her how God bound himself to that promise by making a very dramatic covenant with me.

I'm a fairly wealthy man now and, as with me, Sarai has a lot of responsibilities. It's like managing a fairly large business with lots of employees. She has servants of her own as well. One of them is a woman named Hagar – a woman she acquired when we were in Egypt. That really brings me to the story I was going to tell you – that stupid thing I did that seemed like such a good idea at the time.

I needed to tell you a little about Sarai first because I thought then you would understand better how I got into this mess. I think I've already told you Sarai couldn't have kids. And I've told you that the whole reason we are here in Canaan is because God told us to come and that he would give Sarai and me a large family. Well we'd been

here 10 years already and Sarai was 65 when we got here. As with me, she must have believed God would do a miracle and allow here to have a child even at her age and mine. But the longer it went on, I guess, the less she believed. I should have seen it coming. She was discouraged. She had left her family and moved here, building her whole life around the idea that she would have children – and then 10 years of nothing except following me around while I made mistakes.

One day she came to me with this idea. She said that since God obviously wasn't going to give her children, I should sleep with her servant Hagar and have a child by her. Now I know I should have stood up to Sarai right then and stopped the whole idea before it went one minute further but you have to know Sarai to know how adamant she can be about something. I could tell she had thought a lot about this and she wasn't about to be dissuaded.

Now, some of you men might think "Why would you object Abram?" You need to know that I'm as human as the next guy but sex wasn't the issue here. Hormones are not what gave this idea credibility. You see, I'd gotten to the same place Sarai had. I told you before how I struggled with doubt. I, too, had begun to wonder if I'd heard God correctly. I, too, began to wonder if God would do what he had promised – give us a family. But just as much, I began to wonder if I wasn't doing something I was supposed to be doing to make God's promises come to pass. If God wouldn't do it, maybe we could help him out. So here I was entertaining this wild idea of Sarai's.

What made the idea more plausible was that it wasn't unusual for a man to get a family this way. If the wives of wealthy men had no children they could have a surrogate have a child for them. You know about surrogate motherhood. The only difference is that we didn't have in-vitro fertilization, test-tube babies or the other options available later. In the laws of the nations around us, the child of Sarai's servant would legally become Sarai's child. It sounded like a plan to us. So there we were, helping God out because we couldn't trust God enough to wait any longer.

Now I've told you what made the idea attractive but **I haven't told** you why I should have seen right through this cockamamie idea. God made it very clear in Genesis 2:24 that marriage was meant to be one

man and one woman for life. He also made it abundantly clear that the sexual relationship was reserved for that one man – one woman marriage. I began to rationalize that since God couldn't give us a family without us breaking that one man-one woman standard for life – we would have to break it to help God out. I realize now that I didn't trust him enough to believe he could or would do the impossible.

I also should have seen through Sarai's request of me. When she came to me, she did exactly the same thing Eve did when Eve invited Adam to sin against God. It says in Genesis 3 that Eve took the fruit, gave it to Adam and he ate it. There I was thousands of years later falling for the same thing – Sarai took her servant Hagar, gave her to me and I took her.

Looking back on the whole situation I realize now, how little I trusted God. When God asked me to wait – I grew impatient – then I took charge – I was determined to take over for God. Have you ever done that?

I think you know that 14 years later I had a son – Isaac. And I had that son the way God promised – Sarai was his mother. Yes, the miracle happened. But that's another story. When our son Isaac married, his wife Rebekah couldn't have children either. It must run in the family (bad attempt at humor). But do you know what he did? I'm supposed to be the head of this family. I'm the one God has spoken to. And I had to learn this from my son Isaac who simply prayed!

Why didn't I think of that? Oh, sure we did pray for a long time, but we gave up. I stopped trusting that God would work his plan in his way and in his timing. When it looked impossible and it was taking too long, I stopped trusting. I started thinking about how I could help God out. Do you know what happened to me? I stopped depending on God and started to depend on myself. Though I never would have said it, I was convinced that my **actions** were more important than God's actions, for getting God's will done. My lack of prayer for the important things of life demonstrated that so clearly. I trusted more in me than in God to get it done.

But back to the story: I said it all seemed like a good idea at the time. Just as Sarai had planned, Hagar got pregnant. All was well, right?

Wrong! And you can't imagine how wrong it was. Not being able to have a child is probably the worst thing that can happen to a woman in our culture – right along with not being married. And **having** a child is probably the best thing that can happen to a woman. You probably don't understand just how significant having children is. To us it means everything – not only the **joy** of having a child but the **security** it means for our old age. But it is more than joy and security – it is the whole of issue of carrying on the family name – the continuation of our very existence depends on having children.

Well, when Hagar got pregnant she got uppity. I don't know all the ways she needled Sarai, but I suppose it was everything from words she said to the looks she gave. Whatever it was it drove Sarai nuts. That little wench, Hagar, was acting like she was now the queen of the ball – that she had a leg up on Sarai. One of our poets years later wrote the following and it fits perfectly: Proverbs 30:21-23 "Under three things the earth trembles, under four it cannot bear up: a servant who becomes king, a fool who is full of food, an unloved woman who is married, and **a maidservant who displaces her mistress.**"

The way Hagar strutted her pregnancy made Sarai so angry that finally Sarai came to me with one of the most irrational things I've ever heard her say. "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." I don't think I had ever seen her so angry. My first thought was "What do you mean I'm responsible." But one thing I had learned through the years is that there is no sense pointing out the lack of logic – not when she is that angry.

But even with that, I made another mistake. Not wanting to put up with Sarai's wrath, I bailed out of my responsibility again. I told her to do whatever she wanted with Hagar. I had a responsibility toward Hagar – she was one of our servants – a woman who depended on us. I also had a responsibility for the child she carried – it was mine. But looking out for my own skin once again – I abdicated responsibility. I hadn't realized how threatened Sarai felt. Well, she put Hagar under such pressure that Hagar ran. It's not like she caught a bus back to Cairo. She was walking, and the road between

Shechem and Egypt, as from Las Vegas to Los Angeles, is mostly desert. I wasn't present for what happened next. But when I heard about it later, it had a profound impact on me.

As guilty as I felt for not intervening when Sarai drove Hagar away, I must say that I felt a sense of relief. Sarai started to settle down and the tension between the two of us subsided. I'd made a couple of serious mistakes but at least it was over. I am so glad that I was wrong about that. I may have felt like it was over but God had other plans. And what "blows me away" is that his plans were for my good not my punishment. God took the mess I'd made and used it to teach all of us, especially me, a very important thing.

Hagar made it to a water well on her way to Egypt. It's the one between Kadesh and Bered – it's still there. There, an angel of the Lord met her! I still don't know if it was God himself or one of his chief angels. It doesn't really matter because whoever it was, they were speaking with all God's authority. God said to her, "Where did you come from and where are you going?" When I heard God had asked that, I couldn't help but think of when he asked similar questions of Adam and Eve and later of Cain. On both of those occasions, those people tried to skirt the issue. But not Hagar, she answered very truthfully, "I'm running away from my mistress, Sarai."

What happened next was kind of "bad news – good news" but it was truly a most gracious thing – gracious to Hagar and to me. The bad news, from Hagar's perspective, was that she was asked to go back to Sarai and submit to her. If I had gone through what Hagar had, I think I'd be afraid of going back. But God in essence told her to submit even if it was painful because -and here was the good news – it would be worth it eventually. God told her that she would become the mother of a great nation. He specifically said she would have descendants too numerous to count. Had I heard those words before? God was asking her to do what he had asked Sarai and me to do – trust him.

Now here's the best part. There's a little symbolism involved but I got the message loudly and clearly. The angel told Hagar to name her child "Ishmael." Do you know what that name means? It means, "God hears." God knew this message would get back to me. Here I was

listening to an Egyptian slave remind me of the very things I should have remembered and believed. God not only heard Hagar's misery of being driven out, but God could also hear our misery, our longing for a son, our impatience with the future. He had not forgotten us. I could still trust him, in spite of how long it was taking for his promises to be fulfilled.

If I was embarrassed that an Egyptian maid was God's instrument for teaching this old patriarch the lessons of God – I was even more embarrassed by **her level of trust** compared to Sarai's and mine. Hagar obeyed. She was willing to go back to that shrewish wife of mine. Not only that, but when the angel finished speaking to her, Hagar named the angel and the place where the angel spoke to her. Here is what she named them: "The God who sees." In our language, when she used that name she was not just saying he sees us in that he knows we are here but he sees in that he really sees, he cares. Hagar was expressing what I should have expressed from the very beginning. When I was tempted to think that God's waiting was evidence his promise wouldn't happen, I should have remembered "He hears and He sees." When Sarai came with that crazy idea about Hagar, I should have remembered and said, "Sarai, our God hears and our God sees! We must pray and wait." When Sarai blamed me and was abusing Hagar, I should have had the faith to say, "Stop it Sarai, our God hears and our God sees!"

The waiting we are forced into is not evidence of a lack of love but to the contrary is an evidence of his **great** love. As one of God's followers said, "Faith is forged in delay." The time between the promise and its fulfillment is the very time that faith is most fully developed.

The thing that I learned most through this whole experience was this: **It is God I must trust, not me.** I quit praying because I began to trust more in myself than in God. I took over because I thought God needed help. My hope in God will not grow until I cease to hope in myself.

Hagar had her baby. I named him Ishmael, just as God directed. He became for me a living testimony to God's grace – the God who

hears. I wish I hadn't been so slow to learn, so stupid as to cause so many people so much hurt – but God was gracious. He turned my mess into a great lesson of faith.

I don't know what God has you waiting for. I don't know how your faith is being developed by God's delay in acting. But I know our God is faithful. He hears and sees – The sovereign promise-keeping God cares! Wait. Pray. Don't usurp God's place.