

February 16/17, 2001

By Faith We Live: A Study of the Life of Abraham

Faith and Patience

Genesis 16:1-16

Pastor Bryan Clark

Have you ever thought of what it would be like to be able to go back into history, knowing what we know now, and offer people some wise counsel? For example, what if you could go to the White House that evening when Abraham Lincoln was headed to the theater and say, “Mr. President, I just don’t think this is a good idea. I really don’t think this is a good night to go to the theater. Maybe we should call up some folks and go bowling or something.”

Or maybe you could go to Pearl Harbor on that Sunday morning and say, “You know, I just feel like today we need to be extra careful. Let’s put our very best people on alert and let’s scramble some planes, and let’s just be overly sensitive this morning.”

Or suppose you could even go back to 9/11 and go to a few specific airports and say, “I just feel like today we need to be very, very cautious...and let’s be careful of this...and let’s watch for that.”

Think about what wise counsel you could offer if you could go back to the past, knowing the future. Think about it in terms of your own life. Wouldn’t you love to be able to go back to certain points in your life—to certain decisions you made that turned out to be disasters—knowing what you now know, to go back to that point in your life and choose differently? That would be significant wisdom if you could see how it all ends and make decisions accordingly.

The reality is, we do have that made available to us because we do have a God who sees tomorrow as clearly as today and yesterday. We are limited; He is unlimited. We see only the present; but to Him the future is as clear as the present. Therefore, He is able to offer you counsel and guidance based on what He knows will happen and where He knows this is all going.

God has given us His Spirit, His very presence, to dwell within us—to guide us, to advise us, to lead us through life—because He does see that whole picture. But to live that way, we do have to be a people of faith. We do have to trust that God knows and God has a plan, and He works things out in His time.

Really, what has to happen for us to be a people of faith is that we must understand what it means to exercise patience. The Bible would use the terminology “to wait on God.” In Psalm 40:1, David is the psalmist, and the Hebrew literally reads, “Waiting, I waited.” I’ve often thought that’s a beautiful poetic way of saying what we sometimes feel: “Waiting, I waited.” It just seems like it goes on and on, and it becomes very, very hard sometimes to wait.

As a matter of fact, if I think of all the things that God calls me to do and be, there’s maybe nothing more difficult than when God just asks me to wait: “Just wait.” That’s not who I am. That’s not how I’m wired. I don’t want to wait. I want to fix it. I want to get it done. I want to take charge. And God says, “Bryan, just wait.”

If I look back in my life and I think about some of the most significant blunders I've made that caused a mess of things, a fairly high percentage of those come down to times when I just got tired of waiting. I just ran out of patience. And so I decided I'm going to take charge. I'm going to fix it. I'm going to control; I'm going to manipulate; I'm going to do something to fix this thing. And I just made a mess.

When I read through the Old Testament and I look at the great heroes of faith and some of the disastrous choices they made along the way, in almost every case it's the same: they just got tired of waiting. They ran out of patience and they made disastrous choices.

There's no question that Abram and Sarai are heroes of faith. They have made incredible choices by faith. They've had their ups and downs. Yes, they did go through their time in Egypt. But, by and large, they've made very significant steps of faith. And as a result of that, they experienced the promises of God.

One of the promises was that they would have a son, and through that son would come the seed through whom the families of the world would be blessed. Now this wasn't a young couple that this promise was made to. By this time Sarai was in her 60's; Abram was in his 70's. They had never had children. Now they hear this news that "you will have a child, and this child will be this promised seed, and through that seed the families of the earth will be blessed." Can you imagine the excitement? Can you imagine what they must have talked about and experienced in those weeks after that promise—that they're finally going to have a child, and what a special promise that child would be?

So a month passed and nothing happened. And two months passed and nothing happened. And three months...and four months...and five months. You can almost imagine the frustration level with having this exciting promise, but nothing's happening. And then it was a year. And then it was two years. Then it was three years...and four...and five...and six...and seven...and eight...and nine...and ten years. Ten years and nothing happened!

They had to have gone from this incredible excitement and anticipation to just absolute anguish and frustration. Abram must have looked at Sarai at times and thought, *This is what stands between me and this promise.* And probably Sarai looked at herself and felt the same way. She looked into the eyes of her husband and realized year after year after year, all that was between Abram and this magnificent promise was her. She just couldn't have a child. It's into that emotional climate that they get tired of waiting, and they make a disastrous choice—a choice so disastrous that when you turn on the nightly news, you hear the effects today of their choice.

Genesis 16:1: "Now Sarai, Abram's wife had borne him no children, and she had an Egyptian maid whose name was Hagar." Now let's pretend you don't know the rest of the story. Wouldn't we agree that verse 1 sounds like trouble? And that's exactly the writer's intent. Sarai could not give Abram a child, but she did have this young Egyptian maid. Now when you read the word "maid," don't think of kind of a European model. This is a slave girl; she's a piece of property.

I mentioned when we studied chapter 13, when Abram went down into Egypt, it seemed like he came back and it actually worked out pretty good for him. I mentioned that there would be residual effects of that journey to Egypt he would experience the rest of his life. One of them relates to his nephew, Lot. While Abram was able to get Lot out of Egypt,

he was never able to get Egypt out of Lot. But this is another one of those residuals. There's probably little doubt that it was while in Egypt they picked up this servant girl by the name of Hagar, who would dramatically change the rest of history.

“So Sarai said to Abram...” Just before we look at what she said, it's interesting that even though Sarai has been a main player in this story, this is the first time that any recorded dialogue comes out of her mouth. In Hebrew narratives, dialogue is very important. It's always important to notice the first time anything comes out of a main character's mouth. The very first time Abram spoke, they were the words of doubt—it was a voice of doubt. Now here we are, the very first time that anything comes out of the mouth of Sarai, and it is the voice of doubt.

“So Sarai said to Abram, ‘Now behold, the LORD has prevented me from bearing children. Please go in to my maid; perhaps I shall obtain children through her’ ” (v. 2). Literally the Hebrew reads, “Perhaps I shall be sonned through her.” There's no question but that Sarai was thinking, *This is maybe the way we can have this son of promise.*

Notice the first thing she says is “behold.” When you read through this text, one of the things you see is that the concept of sight is very important in this particular story. There's a great emphasis on what *we* see versus what *God* sees. What we see is limited; what we see are the circumstances. And that's exactly what Sarai says. She looks at Abram and she says, “Look, this is the way it is. I'm old; I'm barren. For whatever reason, God won't let me have children {*you can hear the anger in her voice*}. Then maybe this is the solution.” And from a human standpoint, that does make sense. She had the circumstances correct: that's what she could see.

I know this may seem rather bizarre, but it's helpful to know that in the Ancient Near East, it was not uncommon that if a wife could not have a child, she could use a servant girl to have a child; and then when the child was born it immediately became the wife's, and not the slave girl's. Another way of saying that is, this was a socially acceptable solution. But just because it was socially acceptable doesn't mean it was acceptable to God.

Sometimes when we're tired of waiting, and our circumstances just look the way they looked to Sarai, we start to consider culturally acceptable options that are really not part of God's plan. Just imagine the emotional frame of mind that Sarai was in. From this excitement of believing she was going to have this son of promise in her old age...to just the anguish of year after year after year the disappointment in not being able to have a child...and finally she resigns herself to the fact that this will never happen. She was so excited, and now she realizes, *It's never going to happen; and the best I can do is offer my husband my servant girl.* I mean, she must have been in unimaginable pain.

What Sarai needed at that moment was for a godly husband to say, “Honey, I know you're hurting. I know you're in pain. And I know that you mean well with this. But God promised! God promised, and He promised it would be *us*. Let's just wait.” But that's not what she heard.

The end of verse 2 says, “And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai.” Maybe Abram had been looking at Sarai for years, and maybe there was a built-in resentment or a feeling that it's never going to happen. And as soon as Sarai offered an alternative, he was ready.

It's interesting how similar this is to Genesis chapter 3. In Genesis 3, the serpent gets Eve to doubt the goodness of God. She takes the initiative, takes the forbidden fruit, gives it to her husband; and he very passively takes it and eats it. Now in Genesis chapter 16 you have Sarai doubting the goodness of God. As a matter of fact, she blames God. For whatever reason, she feels it's God's fault; that He has prevented this. She takes the initiative, and she takes the forbidden fruit and offers it to Abram; and he passively takes it and he eats.

Verses 3,4: "And after Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Abram's wife Sarai took Hagar the Egyptian, her maid, and gave her to her husband Abram as his wife. And he went in to Hagar, and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress was despised in her sight." There was no longer a question of who the problem was: it was Sarai. And as soon as Sarai was out of the way, then Hagar became pregnant with Abram's son. And Hagar looked at Sarai and she despised her. There is probably a whole lot of baggage that goes with what's going on there.

Verse 5: "And Sarai said to Abram, 'May the wrong done me be upon you. I gave my maid into your arms; but when she saw that she had conceived, I was despised in her sight. May the LORD judge between you and me.'" Sarai was angry with God. Now she's venting her frustration and her anger on Abram and saying, "This is your fault; you did this to me." And Abram must have looked at her and said, "Woman, what is your problem? This was your plan, not mine. I'm just kind of doing what you wanted me to do. I thought this would make you happy." And now she's unloading on him.

And again, what Sarai needs right now is a godly husband to say, "Honey, we may have made a huge mistake. We didn't trust God, and now we've got a problem and everything's coming unraveled. We need to come before God and we need to get this thing solved."

Well, that's not what she heard. Verse 6: "But Abram said to Sarai, 'Behold, your maid is in your power; do to her what is good in your sight.' So Sarai treated her harshly, and she fled from her presence." That word "harshly" could be translated "abused." It's a pretty strong term. Abram really wasn't a lot of help. He was a typical passive male, and he said, "Listen, this is your maid. You deal with it. Do whatever you want to her." And so she unloaded on Hagar. You can feel the emotion she has. She's angry with God. She's angry at her husband. And now she's venting on this little servant girl who, frankly, had no choice in any of this.

Now imagine this young maid in a foreign country, and now she is experiencing such abuse and harassment that, as a young pregnant girl, she just leaves and begins to head home. She must have been incredibly frightened. She must have wondered if she would even survive the journey.

If you don't know the rest of the story, one of the questions we would ask at this point is, "What's going to happen?" There's no question that the main characters of the story are Abram and Sarai. I mean, they're really the main characters of this whole drama. So at this point, is Hagar just a casualty of their lack of faith ("poor Hagar") and she drifts into the wilderness and we go on with Abram and Sarai? Well, let's see.

Verse 7: "Now the angel of the LORD found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, by the spring on the way to Shur." The Wilderness of Shur is up in the northeast

part of Egypt. It actually would be considered part of Egypt. So she was headed home. She had a long, difficult journey as a single, pregnant woman. But she had nowhere else to go. I'm sure that frightened and all alone, she was headed home.

But it was there that the angel of the LORD found her. It isn't *an* angel of the Lord. It's *the* angel of the LORD (capital L-O-R-D). That's Yahweh, Jehovah. We believe *the* angel of the LORD is God taking on human form on various occasions throughout the Old Testament. As a matter of fact, most scholars think it was the second member of the Trinity, God the Son, who was appearing in human form before He became flesh and dwelt among us. Very significant appearing! It's worth noting this is the first time in all of human history that it's recorded that God became flesh and met face-to-face with someone. It's the first time the angel of the LORD has appeared. And it wasn't to Noah; it wasn't to Abram...yet. The very first time was to a seemingly insignificant, pregnant Egyptian slave girl who was frightened and alone.

Have you ever thought about how close Hagar came to this magnificent promise? I mean, she was right there. She was in Abram's home. She was headed in a direction with Abram and family where they, together, would experience this magnificent promise of God. For ten years, Abram and Sarai must have talked about their God and who He is and why they were on this journey. But now what they had taught her is that this God is powerless; this God can't come through in the end. She must have fled with all kinds of mixed-up ideas. And what she was doing was heading back to Egypt. Egypt represents the system of this world, a system apart from God. She came that close to the promise. But because of Abram and Sarai's lack of faith, she was now going back to Egypt and she would be assimilated into that pagan culture. And she would never come out again...except God came looking for her.

This story is very much like the story of the lost sheep in the New Testament, where God went looking. I don't know if you ever struggle with whether or not God cares about you. I don't know if you ever feel like you're just so insignificant that God could never really care or God could never really notice. I don't know if you have ever have thought, *You know, I understand God with the "Noahs" and God with the "Abrahams" and God with the "Moses" but that's not me. I'm more like the insignificant little pregnant Egyptian slave girl. What would God want with me?*

It is interesting that God shows up in human form to rescue this little girl and bring her home. And so He does. Verses 8-11: "And he said, 'Hagar, Sarai's maid {*notice in verse 3 she was given to be Abram's wife, but God, in a sense, is saying, "I'm not buying that, you're still Sarai's maid"*}}, where have you come from and where are you going?' And she said, 'I am fleeing from the presence of my mistress Sarai.' Then the angel of the LORD said to her, 'Return to your mistress, and submit yourself to her authority.' Moreover, the angel of the LORD said to her, 'I will greatly multiply your descendants so that they shall be too many to count.' The angel of the LORD said to her further, 'Behold, you are with child, and you shall bear a son; and you shall call his name Ishmael, because the LORD has given heed to your affliction.' "

The angel of the LORD, God Himself, comes before Hagar and says, "I want you to go back. I want you to go back home." In a sense, what He said was, "I'll take care of it. I just want you to go back, and I want you to submit to this authority. And I want you to know you're going to have more descendants than you can even begin to count. And you're going to have a son, and I want you to name this son 'God hears.'" That's what the name

“Ishmael” means: “God hears”—because He said, “God has heard your anguish, and He’s going to take care of you.”

Isn’t that what this whole story has been about? Abram and Sarai, in their anguish, convince themselves God doesn’t hear. They are thinking, *God doesn’t hear... God doesn’t care... God isn’t doing anything... therefore we need to fix it; we need to take charge.* So Hagar took off, and she’s convinced that whoever this God is, He doesn’t hear and He doesn’t care. And so God says, “I want you to name your son ‘God hears.’ Don’t ever forget that.”

Verse 12: “And he will be a wild donkey of a man, his hand will be against everyone, and everyone’s hand will be against him; and he will live to the east of all his brothers.” Probably not a description every mother wants to hear of her son. He was being described as independent, very stubborn, and being in conflict as a way of life—not just in conflict, but in conflict with his brothers.

When you turn on the nightly news, that’s what you’ll hear. Ishmael was the father of the Arab people and they would forever be in conflict with their brothers, the Jews. They can sign a hundred peace treaties in the Middle East, but there won’t be peace—because the problem is not geographical. The problem is theological, and it goes back to Genesis 16. And God said this is the way it’s going to be. It is a constant reminder of Abram and Sarai’s choice.

We do have to be a little bit careful with that, though. It’s not to say that every Jew hates every Arab, and every Arab hates every Jew. We have Jews in this church and we have Arabs in this church, and through the life-changing power of the Gospel they love each other. But what it is saying is that as nations, as a people, they will constantly be in conflict. And history certainly bears that out.

Verse 13: “Then she called the name of the LORD who spoke to her, ‘Thou art a God who sees.’ ” In the Hebrew it’s the name “El Roi” and it means “You are a God who sees.” She is saying to God, “You are a God who hears... You are a God who sees.”

“For she said, ‘Have I even remained alive here after seeing Him?’ ” It was believed that if you saw God face-to-face, you could not live. And that’s true... if you saw God in all His glory you couldn’t. But she did see God face-to-face and she lived. And she’s realizing this was an incredible moment that she is experiencing.

Verse 14: “Therefore the well was called Beer-lahai-roi; behold, it is between Kadesh and Bered.” The name of the well means “the well of the Living One who sees me.” From now on, every time somebody came to the well, they would remember, *This is the well of the Living One who sees me.* Again, you remember the big emphasis in this text on sight. If I live by sight and I make my choices based on my circumstances, I’m going to make some bad choices. But there is a God who sees the beginning from the end—sees the big picture. He sees... He hears... we trust Him.

Verses 15, 16 imply that Hagar went back home, explained what had happened to Abram and Sarai; they understood the error of their ways; and everybody got back on track. “So Hagar bore Abram a son; and Abram called the name of his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. And Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to him.” Hagar went back. Hagar had his son. And as God had directed, they name him “God hears”—so

that every time they invited Ishmael to supper, they said, “God hears.” Every time they called his name they were reminded that God hears, and they would have thought, *Let us never again make such a disastrous choice because we believe God no longer hears our prayers.*

Why would that be important? Because after Ishmael was born, another month passed and Sarai was not pregnant. And then two months...and then three months...and then a year. And then two years... three years... four years... five years... six years... seven years... eight years... nine years... ten years... eleven years... twelve years... thirteen years... beyond when Ishmael was born, Abram and Sarai continued to live with no son of promise. And every time they began to feel the anguish of that, they needed to remember Ishmael’s name “God hears” and remember, *God hears...God knows...we’ve just got to wait. Let’s not make another choice like we did before.*

For some of you, that’s right where you’re at. You would say with the psalmist, “That’s what I feel: ‘waiting, I waited.’ I just keep praying. I just keep asking. It feels like God doesn’t hear. It feels like God doesn’t see. I’m getting tired of waiting.”

And maybe some of you are thinking about taking charge, feeling like, *I’m going to figure out some way to take charge. I’m going to fix this. I’m going to control; I’m going to manipulate it. I’m going to take a socially acceptable way to resolve this.* But you know that God has said, “Just wait for Me. Just wait.”

The next time you turn on the news and hear of the conflict in the Middle East, that should send the message that says “God hears.” It is a message that says, “God hears. Don’t do that. Don’t make that disastrous choice. Just wait.” You can never be a person of faith if you don’t understand what it means to wait on God.

Our Father, we’re thankful that you are a God who is faithful—but you’re faithful in your time. You’re faithful because you see the beginning from the end and you know what’s best. But, Lord, sometimes it is so hard to wait. Teach us what it means to be people of faith. In Jesus’ name, Amen.