

# Abraham and the Life of Faith

## “Giving God a Hand”

[Sarai] said to Abram, “The LORD has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my maidservant; perhaps I can build a family through her.”  
Genesis 16:2

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Major Gerald (Gary) Reilly  
The Salvation Army  
Mississippi-Rideau Lakes Corps

*Patience is a virtue with which we all struggle, even moreso in a world of instant everything. Speed is where we are at – and the faster the better. One of the hardest lessons to learn is that good things come to those who wait – and if all good gifts come down from the Father of the Heavenly lights, then we must wait for God's good. It is when we rush ahead or take matters into our own hands that we run, with great haste, into a myriad of problems. We reflect today on how the life of faith waits patiently on God's timing. For God doesn't need our help as much as He desires our trust.*

Abram has shone like a beacon to guide the traveler on the walk of faith; first in refusing to exert his right over Lot in regards to the preferred fertile ground of the Jordan valley, then his gallant rescue of Lot and the citizens of Sodom from a cadre of powerful kings, followed by his refusal to accept anything from an earthly monarch lest God be denied His glory. He has been accounted righteous through his believing that God will fulfill His promise and borne witness to the flaming torch and smoking firepot passing between the pieces, thereby God committing Himself to the covenant. One would think Abram would no longer waver; no longer struggle; no longer be weighed down by doubts and anxiety over the promise. One would be wrong to think that, he is, after all, one of us.

It has been written:

In Abraham we see the life of faith. He stands out as the supreme exemplar of the faith-life. In him we see the man of faith going forth, trusting in the Divine guidance, believing the Divine promises, receiving Divine assurances, inheriting the Divine blessing, undergoing sharp testings, and—despite occasional failures—being “accounted righteous” through faith, and being called “the friend of God.”<sup>1</sup>

In this chapter we see Abram give in to the reasoning of expediency<sup>2</sup>...or what we might call the tyranny of the urgent. Time is marching on. Ten years have passed since arrival in Canaan. The tension experienced by Abram and Sarai rises with each day as their bodies begin to betray them. Romans 8:28 reminds us that: “...we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” It's one thing to know this, but another to live this. It's an easy thing to speak these words into the struggles of a friend, a family member, or a neighbor; or have them etched into an attractive wall hanging, or displayed as a background for our desktop. It's another thing to wait ten long years for God to work the good that He has promised.

The rising tension over the next three chapters of Genesis draws us into the agony of waiting; the struggle to keep on believing, even when all the evidence suggests otherwise. The chapter opens to the predominant theme of where the story of Abram and Sarai has taken us. That theme is: can we wait for God to fulfill His promise, when

the promise carries? It examines what happens when we attempt to fulfill the promise apart from God. And our lesson is: God doesn't need our help as much as He desires our trust.

<sup>1</sup> Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children.

It has now been ten years since the family arrived in Canaan, and despite the promise given Abram, Sarai still has had no child. There was then a distinct stigma associated with being a barren woman. A barren woman was a drain on resources and a hindrance to the longevity of a family. It's interesting perhaps to note that though the promise has been repeated several times to Abram, and he has learned in Chapter 15 that the child will have his DNA, Sarai has yet to be identified as the mother. If Abram had shared his conversations with God, and it's hard to imagine him not, then Sarai perhaps had that question of parentage gnawing at her.

But she had an Egyptian maidservant named Hagar; <sup>2</sup> so she said to Abram, "The LORD has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my maidservant; perhaps I can build a family through her."

Walter Brueggemann writes:

Instead of waiting for the direction of God in this respect also, Sarai seems in her impatience to have anticipated the Lord; and, as we always do when taking things into our own hands, in a manner contrary to the mind of God, as well as to her own sorrow and disappointment.<sup>3</sup>

Sarai pulls no punches here. God is blamed for her lack of children, with Sarai accusing God of actively preventing her from becoming pregnant. Perhaps the uncertainty over whether the child will come from her body; or the embarrassment of not producing any child; or the pressure of the culture; has pushed her to the brink. She comes up with a solution—a manmade solution, a practice that was apparently well-known in the ancient Near East. She decides to give a slave girl to her husband through which to bear children.<sup>a</sup>

Take a moment to reflect on Sarai's language. Does it sound at all familiar? Notice the use of "me" "my" and "I". To be childless was to lose face; to be thought of as worthless; to be of no account. I hear a faint echo of the builders of Babel here, who refused follow the Lord's instructions, and decided they would make a name for themselves.

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<sup>a</sup> There is debate over whether or not her offer to her husband would have been an obligation, rather than an attempt to subvert the promise of God. Someone has suggested that there is a transition presented in this story whereby marriage's primary purpose of companionship (Genesis 2:18) is replaced by marriage as a means of reproduction, with all the negative effects that brings.

When it becomes about us, and my needs become my primary concern, good things seldom follow.

The surprising thing for me, is Abram's reaction.

[Abram agreed to what Sarai said.](#)

Did you hear that? Some translations offer "Abram listened to Sarai" (AMP, ESV, NASB, NRSV) or "Abram hearkened" (ASV, KJV, RSV) – but whichever way it is rendered, not only does it imply he agreed with her solution, he also agreed with her interpretation of the problem. It was God's doing. "Your right, Sarai," his agreement implies, "God has prevented you from having a child." Shortly after Abram had spent a day chasing away the birds of prey as they attempted to interrupt the covenant ceremony, Sarai and Abram allow the predator of impatience to endanger the promise. Just as he had done years before in following the common practice of going down to Egypt, once again, without calling on the name of the Lord, Abram takes matters into his own hands—and bed.

[<sup>3</sup> So after Abram had been living in Canaan ten years, Sarai his wife took her Egyptian maidservant Hagar and gave her to her husband to be his wife. <sup>4</sup> He slept with Hagar, and she conceived.](#)

Hagar has no voice here, she is just a tool, a means for Abram and Sarai to get what they want. Not once in the conversation between Sarai and Abram, do they refer to Hagar by name. She is always "my maidservant", "my servant", "your servant", a "her" or a "she". On top of that, she is an Egyptian – an outsider, something we are reminded of on two occasions. It would seem logical to assume that Hagar had been gifted by the Pharaoh during Abrams Egyptian mishap<sup>b</sup>, and we have little indication as to the age of Hagar, not that it matters. Her life is rendered of no concern to Sarai, and one can hear the justification of them when Hagar became pregnant, convincing themselves that they had acted wisely.

Isn't that what we do when we run ahead of God and things appear to be fine. Of course, in those cases we seldom stop to wonder about the blessings missed in not waiting on God's timing. However, it doesn't take long for their expediency to begin to unravel.

[When she knew she was pregnant, she began to despise her mistress.](#)

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<sup>b</sup> Genesis 12:16

The Hebrew word translated 'despise' means "to be slight, be trifling, to be of little account." The word is used twice for effect, used by both the narrator and by Sarai herself. The wisdom of Proverbs perhaps reflects the flaw in the Sarai's strategy:

- <sup>21</sup> There are three things that make the earth tremble—  
no, four it cannot endure:  
<sup>22</sup> a slave who becomes a king,  
an overbearing fool who prospers,  
<sup>23</sup> a bitter woman who finally gets a husband,  
a servant girl who supplants her mistress.

Proverbs 30:21-24

Swindoll notes: When the consequences of sin begin to fall, relationships always suffer."<sup>4</sup> We aren't told what Hagar did, if anything, that 'slighted' Sarai, but one can imagine that in Sarai's fragile state every time Hagar invited someone to feel the baby move, or commented about how she was eating for two, it would be like a dagger in Sarai's psyche. Whether or not the slighting was deliberate or imagined, a schism definitely took place in the camp of Abram—a schism Sarai could not tolerate.

<sup>5</sup> 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."

<sup>6</sup> "Your servant is in your hands," Abram said. "Do with her whatever you think best." Then Sarai mistreated Hagar; so she fled from her.

Naturally the first person she lashes out at is Abram: "This is your fault!" I almost feel sorry for Abram—almost. He does bear some culpability for what has taken place, but Sarai seems to imply that even though she did everything right, others have messed it up. It's interesting that she seems to think there was a right and wrong here—rather than two wrongs. Wrong for her to not trust and therefore suggest a sinful option, and wrong for Abram to blindly go along with the sinful option. Her retort imposes her will, her perspective, on God's decision. She is blind to the reality that it was not an 'either or situation'—they were both wrong.

What is left unsaid is that prior to the discord both her and Abram would have likely thought Hagar's pregnancy was a sign that God had blessed their creative way of producing an heir—even though there was no guarantee Hagar would have a boy. What if a girl? They would still have had no heir. That logic seems to have escaped them. This is not what Sarai had imagined—if only she had stopped to think before rashly suggesting that they take matters into their own hands. Sarai now no longer wants to "build a family" through her Egyptian maidservant. Unfortunately, regret does not and cannot undo what should not have been done.

Furthermore, her relationship with Abram has been affected. From her statement to Abram, it would appear that Sarai feels somehow diminished in the sight of her husband in addition to her maidservant. It is a little interesting (and shocking) that the first utterances of Sarai in the Biblical story are filled with such animosity. Perhaps the frustration of Egypt is finally being vented—and after all, Hagar is an Egyptian—a reminder of Sarai being taken against her will.

I find it is mildly amusing that Abram was able to go to war against four powerful kings, but he has no stomach for disagreement with his wife. Abram tells her to do whatever she wants – more specifically, whatever Sarai “thought best”. What was it that Sarai thought best? She “mistreated” Hagar. The NIV obscures what actually took place here. The NKJV and others have “dealt harshly”, while the HCSB says, “Sarai mistreated her so much that she ran away.”

The Hebrew word means: to afflict, oppress, humble. It’s the same word found in Deuteronomy 26:6; *“But the Egyptians mistreated and **oppressed** us, forcing us to do burdensome labor.”* Isn’t it interesting that years before Israel would come under the harsh treatment of slavery at the hands of their Egyptian masters, we have a young Egyptian girl being abused by the matriarch of the Israelites. One can only wonder at the reaction of those later freed slaves as they reflected on their escape from Egypt. Perhaps that is why God reminded them so often about not being oppressors; of not going the way of Egypt in their treatment of the alien, the stranger the orphan and the widow. God was not talking about social justice—He simply wanted justice, and all justice by nature is social.

What happens here is similar to what happened in Genesis 12, where circumstances overwhelm Abram and Sarai, and so they take matters into their own hands. Not long after having his faith celebrated, Abram gives in to impatience. “Calvin calls their faith “defective”<sup>5</sup>, with another commentator noting that “Faith is not easy. It calls for a persistence which is against common sense. It calls in believing in a gift from God which none of the present data can substantiate.”<sup>6</sup>

## Conclusion

Let me highlight a couple cautions suggested by this text. First of all, we must learn to wait on God; to recognize a delay simply means that the time is not right for a promise to be fulfilled. We too can make the dangerous mistake of impatience. One commentator sees Romans 8:22 as being an apt description of what we are witnessing today: “We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.” Climate change; the 1%; gender dysphoria; social unrest; defunding the police; tearing down the system. All around us creation is groaning, crying out for liberation from decay. We are living in perilous times, and in recognizing

that all is not right in our world, there is this gathered momentum that the church needs to do something. Let's be careful that in wanting to bring solutions to what ails the world we give in to impatience so that we run ahead of God, and then ask for His blessing on what we are doing or have done. Everybody, even those who are not of the family of God, has an awareness that all is not right. Let's not get caught up so much in making things right that we forget that more than our help, God desires our trust.

That leads to a second caution. There are many voices in the world that, like Sarai, offer man-made solutions, to a problem man has no ability to solve. How do I know that? Because they are not new problems, but the same old problem that has plagued mankind since Adam and Eve did not trust God in the garden. Today, we give it a multitude of names. Prejudice. Privilege. Social injustice. Exploitation. However, those are only the symptoms of the underlying issue. Symptoms of an underlying condition the world will not—in fact refuses—to admit. The problem is sin. There is something deeply flawed within the heart of man and only a heart transplant can fix it. There is no solution to sin other than that which comes through the blood of Jesus Christ. A manmade solution will not fix this manmade problem. We need to recognize that some of the groups and organizations out there in the world that are adored by the media and popular opinion, are grossly opposed at their fundamental level to the very God in whom we are to trust. They cry out and protest and demonstrate because they seek a manmade solution. The only solution however, begins with a trust in God.

Lastly, other people are not tools for us to get what we want. The treatment of Hagar here is reprehensible, and completely unnecessary. None of the fracturing of relationships would have taken place if Abram and Sarai had simply continued to trust that God would give them what was promised when the time was right. Maybe within weeks, or even days of God ratifying the covenant with Abram, placing himself in harm's way should the covenant be broken, Abram fails to trust God, and in doing so he also brings hurt and sorrow into the lives of others. A later king would be told: the eyes of the LORD move to and fro throughout the earth so that He may support those whose heart is completely His. You have acted foolishly in this; therefore, from now on you will have wars."<sup>c</sup> The error of Abram here has echoed down through history and into the present, as the sons of Ishmael continue to be a thorn in the side of Israel. If only they had learned that God didn't need their help as much as their trust.

Let me conclude with a story shared by Henry Blackaby. It concerns a missionary couple to whom they were ministering in East Africa. It seems that the parents of the husband were, right from the beginning, opposed to any thought of their son becoming a missionary. They demonstrated their resistance to his choice by refusing even to attend his commissioning service. And so, the young man headed off to the field and nary a word had been heard from his parents in many years that had passed. The question he

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<sup>c</sup> 2 Chronicles 16:9

asked Blackaby was regarding his concern for the souls of his mother and father. Here he was in Africa, ministering to the lost on another continent, while his own parents were in danger of a frightful eternity. Should he return to minister to his parents?

Blackaby counselled that as much concern the missionary had for his parents, God had even more. They decided that they would pray for the parents, and seek God's will regarding the man returning to America. A few months later, after Blackaby returned home he received a letter. It was from the very same missionary. The letter explained that he had received, after years of silence, a letter from his parents. In that letter they explained that several months previous they had impressed upon them an overwhelming and irresistible urge to attend a church not far from their home. That Sunday the Holy Spirit did an amazing work in each of their hearts, and the following Sunday they were baptized into the family of God. And now they sought the forgiveness of a son they had shunned for years. No manmade solution. It was a work of God, accomplished in God's way, at God's time.

That, my friends, is the solution we are looking for. Not running ahead of God. Not taking matters into our own hands. Not looking for a manmade solution, for the solution is "Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord."<sup>d</sup> We don't need a change in laws; nor a change in status; nor a change in government. It is not "the system" that is broken, it is us. What the world needs is for hearts to be changed. And that change begins one heart at a time. I've heard it said many times, "Be the change." No. I can never be the change. I need to be changed, but only God can enact that change. And for that change to take place I need to do the one thing God desires for me to do. I need to trust Him.

So where is your trust this morning? In the midst of your waiting; your struggle with any number of manmade problems; your anxiety over what in the world is going on – do you trust God?

## The Rest of the Story

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<sup>d</sup> Zechariah 4:6

The hurt is so unbearable for young Hagar, that she makes the incredibly bold decision to flee. This could not have been an easy choice, for help would have been a long way off, and danger would have been ever-present. But Hagar is soon to learn that the God of Abram is also the God of Hagar.

I'm sure many of us have been in that place where we are overcome with emotion, and one of the idioms we use to capture that feeling is to say, "We don't know if we are coming or if we are going." Hagar was in such a place. Can you imagine for a moment how incredibly alone she must have been feeling? Her home for the previous ten years has been with Abram and Sarai, and now she is homeless—and pregnant. The journey back to Egypt, which appears to have been where she was heading, will be a long one. But Hagar is not alone.

<sup>7</sup> The angel of the LORD found Hagar near a spring in the desert; it was the spring that is beside the road to Shur. <sup>8</sup> And he said, "Hagar, servant of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going?" "I'm running away from my mistress Sarai," she answered.

Think about this incredible scene somewhere along the long road back to Egypt. For the very first time in the Bible, and to a woman—an Egyptian woman—a runaway slave girl, the Angel of the Lord makes His first appearance. It is not to one of the patriarchs, or to a king, or a prophet or priest. What many see as the preincarnate Christ reveals His presence to a frightened and despairing unmarried pregnant woman.

Here is the first subversive element of this part of the chapter. How much of this part of the story was passed along as oral tradition we have no idea, but the Spirit had Moses record this encounter. What must have been the reaction to the Israelites who would read these words and possibly learn about this encounter for the first time? The Angel of the Lord appeared to who!? While Hagar was just a tool for Abram and Sarai—and a nameless one at that—the first words spoken by the Angel of the Lord was, "Hagar." He called her by name.

When we stop to think about it – Hagar too had made an Abram-like journey, albeit for different reasons. She had been taken from her country, from her people, and from her family. She too had journeyed to another country. And as the conversation continues, we find that she too has a calling on her life.

<sup>9</sup> Then the angel of the LORD told her, "Go back to your mistress and submit to her." <sup>10</sup> The angel added, "I will so increase your descendants that they will be too numerous to count."

Hagar is the only woman in Genesis to receive such a rich promise—an almost Abram-like promise. She will be the mother of a multitude. We might be surprised by the instruction she receives to go back and submit to Sarai—and we will never be told any details of how she was received upon her return (though the relationship seems to never be without tension). That she

is to 'submit' to Sarai would be perhaps a difficult thing to do, considering it was being harshly treated that led to her running away in the first place. The NET footnotes read: Hagar is instructed to not only submit to Sarai's authority, but to whatever mistreatment that involves. God tells Hagar to humble herself." One is reminded of Onesimus, who was directed to return to Philemon, or Peter's instructions to the early Christians, many of who were slaves – "Slaves, submit yourselves to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh."<sup>e</sup>

Paul perhaps goes even further:

Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but like slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men, because you know that the Lord will reward everyone for whatever good he does, whether he is slave or free.

Ephesians 6:5-9

Perhaps the Angel of the Lord is suggesting that Hagar had indeed been treating Sarai in a haughty manner, and therefore had sown some of the seeds of her own treatment. Yes, even the downtrodden, the disadvantaged, the oppressed can be responsible for some of their mistreatment. These are surely challenging words and instructions for our world at a time when 'my rights' and arguments against hegemony abound. The modern certainly bristles at any thought of humbling oneself under any kind of authority outside of ourselves. Yet this is exactly what the early church was instructed to do – and it did; and it was exactly what the Angel of the Lord instructed Hagar to do—and she did.

<sup>11</sup> The angel of the LORD also said to her: "You are now with child and you will have a son. You shall name him Ishmael, for the LORD has heard of your misery. <sup>12</sup> 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 toward all his brothers."

Hagar is told that she will bear a son, and his name is to be Ishmael, which means "God hears." Let that sink in. The name of her son will be a reminder for the rest of her life that her cries and tears, though possibly ignored or dismissed by Abram and Sarai, have not gone unnoticed by the Lord God Almighty. The angel assuring her that "the Lord has heard your misery."

Here again we have this amazing link to the story of Israel, for the Lord heard their groaning under the whip of the taskmasters. Surely the intent of the story here is to reinforce God's directives regarding Israel's treatment of slaves, foreigners, and those who are vulnerable. They are reminded that though they might ignore the misery of those they are in authority over, God will not. Their cries will be a witness against their

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<sup>e</sup> 1 Peter 2:18

oppressors—whether the oppressor is Israelite, Egyptian, Babylonian, Greek, Roman, or any other people who might follow in their footsteps – even the economically advantaged, the socially advantaged. It is a sad and oft forgotten reality that oppressors have come in all manner of skin color, language, and land of origin. As noted above, we are a broken people in need of liberation – a liberation that comes through the redemption offered freely by the grace of God and available to the whosoever.

<sup>13</sup> 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.” <sup>14</sup> That is why the well was called Beer Lahai Roi ; it is still there, between Kadesh and Bered. <sup>15</sup> So Hagar bore Abram a son, and Abram gave the name Ishmael to the son she had borne. <sup>16</sup> Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore him Ishmael.

This young Egyptian slave girl, on the run from an abusive mistress, adds another name to the record of Scripture, and we learn something new about God. He not only is watching over the chosen family, he is also watching over those outside of the family. Even though Ismael is an outsider to the promise, the product of man’s inability to fully trust in God, he is not forgotten by God. It would have been so much easier for God to allow Hagar and her son to simply drift out of the story, but He is not that kind of God. The angel tells Hagar that “the LORD has heard your misery’, to which Hagar replies with a new name for God, ‘the One who sees me.”

As the next few chapters unfold we will see that Ishmael becomes a temptation for Abram to trust in the fruits of his own effort rather than trust in the promise of God.<sup>7</sup>

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> J. Sidlow Baxter, *Explore the Book* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1960), 68.

<sup>2</sup> F.B. Meyer, *Abraham: The Obedience of Faith* (Edinburgh: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1960), 74.

<sup>3</sup> Alfred Edersheim, *Bible History: Old Testament* Genteel Books. Kindle Edition.

<sup>4</sup> Charles R. Swindoll, *Abraham* (Carol Stream: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2014), 74-75.

<sup>5</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Interpretation: Genesis* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1982), 151.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, *Genesis*, 152.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, *Genesis*, 152.