

STUDY FOUR — GENESIS 16
SARAI'S SOLUTION

P R O M I S E

— GENESIS 12 - 25 —

GOD'S GRACIOUS INITIATIVE
IN THE LIFE & TIMES OF ABRAHAM

OVERVIEW

Genesis 16:1-6 – The focus now turns to Sarai. At 75 and having been in Canaan ten years (cf. 12:4-5 and 17:17), Sarai, like Abram, struggles to reconcile God’s promises with their childless reality.

Sarai thus engineers a solution which was a common cultural practise at the time – marriage contracts uncovered from the ancient Mesopotamian city of Nuzi, ‘stipulate that if the wife turns out to be barren, she should provide the husband with a surrogate child-bearer.’ (Walton, *NIV Application Commentary*, 445-6). Sarai nobly sacrifices her marital intimacy in order to expedite God’s promise.

Yet however culturally acceptable this polygamous approach was, it ignored God’s monogamous design for marriage (2:24), betrayed a lack of trust in God’s power and provision, and rode roughshod over Hagar. Furthermore, the turning to an Egyptian signals an ironic reversal of Genesis 12 - it is now Abram, rather than Sarai who is handed over to an Egyptian. The event serves as a warning to the original readers of Genesis, who, wandering in the desert after the Exodus, were themselves tempted to return to Egypt (Num 11:4-6).

However, ‘if we are scandalized by Sarai’s volunteering of Hagar as her surrogate, Abram’s passive, compliant conduct is even more offensive’ (Hughes, 239). Note the striking parallel between Genesis 16 and 3 – both Eve and Sarai “take” and “give” (3:6; 16:3) to their husbands who “listen to the voice of their wives” (3:17; 16:2).

The point here being *not* that it is wrong for a husband to listen to his wife (Abraham is called to do just that in 21:12)! Rather, in both instances, “There was an inversion of the proper spiritual leadership structure in the home, and the result in each case was disaster. Adam and Abram both abdicated their God-given role of spiritual headship, and instead of leading their wives toward the path of obedience to God, they followed their wives away from obedience.’ (Duguid, 64 cf. Eph 5:21-33). Sarai is thus right to blame Abram for the fallout, which itself is the narrator’s comment on the folly of polygamy.

Genesis 16:7-16 – Though Hagar wasn’t entirely innocent (16:4), she certainly was the prime victim in this scenario and so flees back toward Egypt. Much like God hears the cries of enslaved Israel, he graciously hears the cries of Hagar (cf. 3:11; Ex 3:7), and manifests his presence (v 13) in the form of the ‘angels of the Lord.’ God calls Hagar to return to the one through whom God’s global blessing would come. Indeed God foreshadows his blessing upon the nations by blessing Hagar. Her son’s name a reflection of what she had come to know of the Lord (Ishamel = God hears). He indeed hears us, sees us, and comes to us in our suffering, and has done so in Christ.

PROMISE+FULFILMENT

HAGAR+SARAH

Paul explains that Hagar and Sarah are figurative of the Old & New Covenants respectively.

For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and the other by the free woman. His son by the slave woman was born according to the flesh, but his son by the free woman was born as the result of a divine promise. These things are being taken figuratively: The women represent two covenants. One covenant is from Mount Sinai and bears children who are to be slaves: This is Hagar. Now Hagar stands for Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present city of Jerusalem, because she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother. . . Now you, brothers and sisters, like Isaac, are children of promise. Galatians 4:22-26, 28

As Ishmael was the son of a slave, so too does the Law (given at Sinai) hold us in bondage to sin (thus liable to judgement). On the other hand, the New Covenant in Christ’s blood sets us free from the guilt and power of sin and leads us to be heirs of the promise like Isaac.

Whereas Ishmael was the result of human effort and scheming, Isaac was a miracle of God’s grace. In the same way, we become children of God as a result of the promise and not according to the works of the flesh. We are justified by faith and not by works. Let us therefore cease trying to secure the promise of God’s blessing through our own efforts, manipulation and performance but place our faith in God’s promise of salvation in Christ.

GETTING STARTED

1. When it comes to navigation on the road or on foot, do you prefer shooting for the shortcut, or staying on the main route?

INTO THE TEXT

Read Genesis 16:1-6

2. Is Sarai's proposal commendable in any way (v 1-2)? Why or why not?
3. Noting Hagar's nationality, what has Egypt come to represent thus far in the narrative (c.f. 12:10; 13:10) and why might this have been significant for the original hearers of Genesis?¹
4. Is Sarai justified in her accusation against Abram (v 5)?
5. How does this account parallel that of Adam & Eve in the Garden of Eden?
6. Do you have any general principles that help you respond constructively when a loved one is perhaps pointing you away from obedience to Christ?

Read Genesis 16:7-16

7. Why might the Lord have called Hagar to return to Abram and Sarai?
8. From a Jewish perspective what might have been surprising about God's response to Hagar? (cf. Exodus 3:7)
9. What do we learn of God's character through Hagar's encounter with Him?
10. *'Yet though sin cannot simply be waved away and often has deep and lasting consequences in our lives, its eternal ramifications have been dealt with. Sin cannot be buried and forgotten, but it can be atoned for.'* (Duguid, 73)

What comfort is there here for those of who (though having been forgiven by Christ), live with the ongoing ramifications and complexities of sinful failure?

TAKEAWAY

11. Where in your life are you tempted to take short cuts as opposed to going God's way?
Spend time praying for each other that you'd remain faithful and steadfast in obedience.

¹ For more information on the Torah/Pentateuch, as well as its original hearers, read the series intro package posted online at stjames.info/covidonlineministries