

9 AUGUST 2020 – 9AM STREAM

SARAI'S SOLUTION [GENESIS 16]

1. Sin & its Consequences

To read the Bible well, one of things you want to do is read its different parts according to their genre. For example, in order to read and understand the Psalms well, you'd want to first acknowledge that you are reading poetry and therefore be alert to poetic devices etc.

When it comes to this part of Genesis, we are reading narrative – a story is being told. And one convention that Biblical story tellers use to build expectation and communicate meaning is that of a type scene.

Type scenes create a sense of *deja vu* by repeating elements from scenes already familiar to the audience. You see them in modern movies all the time. For example if I made this sound [Jaws theme], you'd know that I'm trading off Jaws and wanting to build suspense of an impending animal attack. Similarly, if you watched a clip of a person texting with their mobile phone whilst driving their car and looking very distracted, you're expecting them to soon have a car accident. These are modern example of type scenes, story tellers use them all the time and Biblical story tellers are no different.

We see it in this morning's passage as the narrator gives us a strong sense of *déjà vu* with regard to what happened in the garden with Adam and Eve. Though it's perhaps more vividly portrayed in the Hebrew, it's still really evident in the English, I wonder if you can notice it in verse 3 –

Sarai his wife *took* her Egyptian slave Hagar and *gave* her to her husband to be his wife. He slept with Hagar, and she conceived.

Now pay attention to the verbs in this other very familiar episode earlier on from Genesis in chapter 3, **When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she *took* some and ate it. She also *gave* some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it.**

Wife takes and gives, husband passively complies. The alarm bells are meant to be ringing for us as we read Genesis 16, and this is important to note, because otherwise Sarai's proposed solution to her family's childlessness might have seemed understandable.

After all, verse 3 reveals that they had already been in the land ten long years and still had no child. After the pain of repeated miscarriages, it's no wonder that Sarai wanted to try something different. Additionally, archaeological discoveries from the region and corresponding time period reveal that Sarai's offer of a maidservant to provide her husband with an heir was a commonly accepted practise. Sarai's polygamous solution in verses 1-4 might seem strange to modern ears, but not in her culture.

Yet as understandable as her response was to her contemporaries, we know that it was not defensible. Like Eve and Lot, she was living by sight and not by faith, let me re-read verses 1-2

Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. But she had an Egyptian slave named Hagar; so she said to Abram, "The Lord has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my slave; perhaps I can build a family through her."

The first key thing we note here is that Sarai acknowledged the Lord's power in verse 2 – it is he who has prevented her from conceiving and therefore it is he alone who can change that. Yet rather than look to the one alone who can provide and trust in his goodness to do so, Sarai looks to engineer her own solution to try and bring about God's promise of an heir.

This here is a lesson for us, that at the root of sin is unbelief. If, for example, we fail to really believe that God and his ways are good, we will prioritise our own way over God's and disobey him. This is what Eve was tempted to do in the garden as she was lead to doubt the goodness of God and his command not to eat the fruit of the knowledge of the tree of good and evil.

Sin thus stems from unbelief. Romans 14:23 puts it like this, **everything that does not come from faith is sin**. Far from being driven by faith, Sarai's solution lacked confidence in God's goodness and provision and thus sought to engineer her own solution.

Yet not only does sin stem from unbelief, sin carries with it serious consequences. Consider what Galatians 6:7 says, **Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows**.

Sadly we see this in Genesis 16. Firstly, consider how it is that the Egyptian Hagar come to be part of their household in the first place – Genesis 12:16 tells us that Abram acquired female servants from Pharaoh as a result of his retreat and deceit in Egypt. The Hagar before us in Genesis 16 is the consequence of Abram's earlier failure.

Secondly, consider the painful consequences of Sarai's sinful suggestion – Abram doesn't need his arm twisted to commit wife-sanctioned adultery, Hagar's personhood is thoroughly disregarded, Hagar herself then seeks to usurp Sarai's position as matriarch in the family on account of her pregnancy, Sarai this reacts with finger pointing, only for Abram to remain pathetically passive until finally Hagar is forced to flee at the hands of serious mistreatment of Sarai.

The consequences of sin have thus wrought havoc in the household destroying relationships as often sin does. The situation was a mess that couldn't be simply swept away. Hagar was now expecting and nothing could change that. Abram and Sarai's intimacy had been shattered and this couldn't be easily restored. There were now serious fault lines running through the household that couldn't be immediately resolved. We then later discover that Hagar's child and his descendants will go on to be prosperous and numerous and turn out to be a thorn in the side of God's people for millennia.

Hear this warning as you continue on in your faith, sin is deceitful, it threatens to be harmless but carries with it lasting, complex and tragic consequences. Even in the seemingly small decisions, going our own way rather than God's can lead to painful consequences that can't easily be done away with. This remains the case even when these sins are socially acceptable or even encouraged by our families. Are there patterns of behaviour, of eating, of spending, of planning, of investing (as opposed to given) that are perhaps endorsed by your family and even society, but don't proceed from faith? Don't be ignorant to the far reaching consequences of sin.

To the husband or wife entertaining adultery, the retiree living self-indulgently, the investor hoarding up wealth, the manager or executive abusing authority, the supposed friend criticising others, the student messing around with pornography, hear again Galatians 6:7, **Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows**. And heed the tragic example of Esau of whom it is said Hebrews 12:16, **See that no one is sexually immoral, or is godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son**. Sin has at its root unbelief and is serious in its consequences; God desires to warn us in his word this morning.

2. God & His Comfort

There will no doubt be some watching this morning who personally feel the pain of this. Perhaps you're reeling from the long term consequences of your own sinful failing or of someone else's. If so, the question you're no doubt asking is, "is there any good news for me?"

We turn now to the experience of Hagar in verses 7 to 16. Here we see a woman who is both collateral and culprit, caught up in the nasty consequences of sin, yet in it God reaches out in grace and extends mercy and compassion to the downtrodden, downcast and even the guilty. He does so by powerfully revealing himself as the God who hears (hence the name Ishmael which means as much) and the God who sees. Listen again to verse 13, **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."**

Verse 13 is monumental, up until this point, no one has named God. In Biblical times, to name someone was to make a statement as to their character, nature and destiny. Hagar here confidently does so because in the midst of her suffering God has given her a remarkable revelation of himself.

She now knows that He is close to the downtrodden and downcast. He is not only omnipotent (all powerful), but omniscient (all seeing). He is the only one who knows us truly and fully. We may feel disregarded or discarded by others, but he knows us better than we do ourselves. And no matter what situation we are in, he hears our cries, as Psalm 86:5 says, **You are forgiving and good O Lord, abounding in love to all who call to you.**

For the culprits and the collateral, for those reeling from the tragic and ongoing consequences of sin, know that God sees you and he hears you. Just as he called Hagar to return to Sarai and promised to bless her, so too can we know that relief will come for us not as we avoid the pain, but as we face up to it with God at our side.

This God who hears you and sees you may see fit to lift the consequences. But more likely he'll redeem them for our good and his glory. Just think about King David's most terrible act in 2 Samuel 11, his murder of Uriah and adultery with Bathsheba. Who was it that God chose to be the heir to the throne and ancestor of Jesus? Bathsheba's son, Solomon.

Our God turns a tangle of knots into a rich tapestry, even those knots which have been terribly complicated by our own failing, or that of someone close to us. He hears you. He sees you and he won't give up on you. That is the good news for the culprits and collateral damage of and from sin this morning.

3. Christ & His Cleansing

Yet perhaps here is the greatest news. I mentioned earlier on the catastrophic consequences that arose because both Eve then Sarai, *took* and *gave*. Yet there is another place in the Bible when these verbs conspicuously resurface. Listen to Luke 24 from verse 26 –

While they were eating, Jesus *took* bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and *gave* it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is my body."

Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."

Though the singular acts of Eve and Sarai bore terrible consequences for many, the faithful act of Christ did the opposite. Though Eve and Sarai invited their loved ones to share that which would lead them into sin, Jesus invites us to share in his body broken and his blood shed which rescues us from sin and judgement.

You see, because of Christ we can know that no matter how terrible the consequences of our sin, we know that the ultimate consequences have been dealt with by Christ on the cross. As heart-breaking as relational breakdown is, what is terrifying is our relationship with God being eternally severed as we come under his wrath. Yet we no longer need to fear that reality because Jesus has taken and given of himself on our behalf, as we rightly celebrate at the Lords Supper, so that we might go free. Because of Jesus, you can know that you are forgiven.

There may be mess in your life that has been caused by your own failing or by others, but God wants you to know in High Definition what Hagar knew with broad brush strokes, the Lord sees you and hears you and longs to make you his own such that whatever befalls you in this life, you might know that you are eternally his, and eternally loved and forgiven.

And as the God who hears he promises in Romans 10:13, **Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.**

So this morning hear the warning that sin has serious consequences, but for those who have fallen, know that God graciously meets us in the mess, sustains us through these circumstances and ultimately has dealt with them once and for all through Christ. Praise God. What freedom.