

Abraham: The Father of the Faithful, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 5: Running Ahead of God: Hagar and Ishmael

Genesis 16

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Genesis 16 falls in the long gap between the covenant promise of Genesis 15 and its fulfillment in the birth of Isaac, and it is fundamentally a lesson about waiting. Ten years after the promise, with Sarai still barren, the couple resorts to a culturally accepted arrangement: a child through Sarai's servant Hagar. The historical setting is important so the class does not read modern assumptions into the story; surrogate childbearing through a servant was a recognized practice in the ancient Near East, which is exactly why it looked like a sensible plan. The narrator's pointed phrase, "Abram listened to the voice of Sarai," deliberately echoes Genesis 3:17 and signals that this reasonable-looking plan is a step away from faith.

Two doctrinal currents run through the lesson. The first is the danger of running ahead of God, of trusting the flesh and our own efforts to secure what only God can give, and the real, lasting consequences such shortcuts create. The fallout in the household is immediate and the conflict surrounding Ishmael endures for generations. The second current is God's sovereign faithfulness and mercy in the midst of human failure. God does not abandon His promise; Isaac is still coming. And God shows tender compassion to Hagar, the overlooked and mistreated servant, revealing Himself as the God who sees and hears the afflicted. Paul later draws on this episode in Galatians 4:21–31 to contrast the child born of the flesh with the child born of promise, flesh and works against grace and promise, a connection the teacher can use to give the lesson doctrinal weight.

Handle Ishmael and Hagar with care and dignity. Ishmael is not a villain; God blesses him and hears him, and the point is never to disparage him or his descendants. The contrast Paul draws is theological (flesh versus promise), not a judgment on persons. Pastorally, this lesson speaks to two kinds of people in the room: the impatient, who are tempted to engineer their own solutions rather than wait on God, and the overlooked, who need to know that God sees them. Aim to lead both toward deeper trust in the God who keeps His promises in His own time and never loses sight of the suffering.

Question 1

Student Question:

After ten years of waiting, Sarai proposed that Abram father a child through her servant Hagar, and "Abram listened to the voice of Sarai" (vv. 1–2), an echo of Eden. What does this scheme reveal about the temptation to fulfill God's promises by our own means and timing, and about the difference between trusting God and trying to help Him along?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Set the emotional and historical context. Ten years had passed since the promise, Sarai was barren, and the arrangement she proposed was culturally normal and looked entirely reasonable. This is what makes the episode so instructive: the temptation to run ahead of God rarely arrives looking sinful. It arrives looking sensible, practical, and overdue.

Point to the narrator's deliberate echo of Eden. "Abram listened to the voice of Sarai" recalls Genesis 3:17, where Adam listened to the voice of his wife and ate. The parallel is a quiet flashing light: a step away from simple trust in God's word toward a human fix. The text is not condemning consultation with one's spouse; it is marking a shift from God's plan to a self-devised one.

Draw the key distinction. Faith waits on God to keep His promise in His way; the flesh grows impatient and seizes the initiative. Both Abram and Sarai still believed a child was coming; their failure was not unbelief in the promise but unwillingness to wait for God's means and timing. They tried to help God, and helping God by abandoning His way is really trusting ourselves.

Apply it to the believer. We do the same whenever we take a genuine promise or calling of God and try to force its fulfillment by methods God has not blessed: the believer who compromises convictions to secure a good thing, the single person who settles outside the faith to escape loneliness, the worker who cuts corners to reach a legitimate goal. The good end does not sanctify the fleshly means.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Temptation to run ahead of God usually looks sensible, not sinful
- The Eden echo: listening to a human voice over God's word (Genesis 3:17)
- Faith waits on God's means and timing; the flesh seizes the initiative
- Trying to help God as a subtle form of trusting ourselves
- A good end does not justify fleshly means

Discussion Prompts

- Why does running ahead of God so often look reasonable rather than sinful?
- What is the difference between trusting God and trying to help Him along?
- Why is it not enough to pursue a good goal if we use fleshly means to reach it?

Question 2

Student Question:

Abram and Sarai grew tired of waiting and manufactured their own solution. In what specific area of life are you tempted right now to run ahead of God, to engineer the outcome yourself rather than wait on His timing? What makes the waiting so hard?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Invite the class to name a current waiting place. Almost everyone has one: a longed-for relationship, a prayer that has gone unanswered for years, a career hope, a wayward child, a health concern, a season of loneliness. The temptation to engineer an outcome attaches to these real, aching desires.

Help them see what makes waiting so hard. Waiting feels passive, and we are doers; it feels uncertain, and we crave control; it feels like God has forgotten, and we fear being left behind. Naming the difficulty honestly is part of resisting the shortcut.

Distinguish godly action from running ahead. Waiting on God is not laziness or fatalism; it includes prayer, faithful obedience, and wise steps within God's will. The line is crossed when we abandon God's ways to force His promised outcome on our schedule. Ask each person to identify their own 'Hagar plan' and to bring it back under God's timing.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Identifying the current season of waiting
- Why waiting feels passive, uncertain, and slow
- The difference between faithful waiting and passive fatalism
- Bringing our shortcuts back under God's timing

Discussion Prompts

- What are you most tired of waiting on God for right now?
- What makes that particular waiting so hard?
- What would faithful waiting, as opposed to a shortcut, look like there?

Question 3

Student Question:

The plan worked biologically but shattered the household: Hagar despised Sarai, Sarai blamed Abram and dealt harshly with Hagar, and Hagar fled (vv. 3–6). What does this fallout teach about the collateral damage of running ahead of God, and the way one impatient choice can ripple outward into many relationships?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Trace the wreckage step by step, because the text does. The moment the plan succeeds, Hagar grows contemptuous, Sarai becomes bitter and jealous, the two women turn on each other, Abram passively abdicates, and a pregnant woman ends up fleeing into the desert. One choice, and every relationship in the household is poisoned.

Draw the principle about sin's ripple effects. Running ahead of God is rarely a private matter; it pulls others into its consequences. The shortcut that looked like a tidy solution created jealousy, cruelty, and a fractured family that would never be the same. Our impatience writes checks that other people have to cash.

Note the blame-shifting, since it is so human. Sarai, who proposed the plan, blames Abram for its results: "May the wrong done to me be on you!" Abram, abdicating, hands Hagar back to be mistreated. No one owns the choice; everyone passes the blame. This sets up the personal question that follows.

Apply it soberly but not hopelessly. The aim is not to make the class afraid of every decision, but to take seriously that running ahead of God has a cost others bear, and to weigh our choices with that in view. The next chapters will also show that God's grace can work even in the mess we make.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Sin's ripple effects spreading through relationships
- Impatient choices that others are left to pay for
- The human habit of blame-shifting rather than ownership
- Weighing decisions in light of their cost to others

Discussion Prompts

- How did one choice poison every relationship in the household?
- Why is running ahead of God rarely a private matter?
- How does the blame-shifting in this scene mirror our own?

Question 4

Student Question:

Abram and Sarai's shortcut hurt people for years to come. Can you trace a season of relational pain or complication in your own life back to an impatient choice, your own or someone else's? How do you tend to handle the damage: by blaming others as they did, or by honestly owning your part?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Handle this question with pastoral gentleness; it can touch deep wounds and real regrets. Some in the room are living with the long consequences of an impatient decision, their own or a family member's. The goal is honest reflection that leads to grace, not spiraling guilt.

Focus on the contrast between blaming and owning. The household in Genesis 16 is a masterclass in blame-shifting. Spiritual maturity moves the other direction, toward honest

ownership: naming our part, repenting where we sinned, and refusing to make others carry what is ours. Ownership is the doorway to healing.

Hold out hope. Even where consequences linger, God is not finished. He met Hagar in the wilderness, and He met Abram's line with the promised son anyway. Owning our part does not erase consequences, but it opens us to God's mercy and to the restoration of relationships that blame keeps locked shut.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Honest reflection on the long consequences of impatient choices
- Blaming others versus owning our part
- Ownership as the doorway to repentance and healing
- God's mercy at work even amid lingering consequences

Discussion Prompts

- Can you trace a present complication to an impatient choice?
- Is your instinct usually to blame or to own your part?
- What would honest ownership open up that blame keeps shut?

Question 5

Student Question:

The angel of the LORD sought out Hagar, a mistreated, runaway servant, by a spring in the wilderness, and spoke to her with compassion and a promise (vv. 7–12). What does God's pursuit of this overlooked woman reveal about His heart for the outcast, the used, and the suffering?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Let the class feel who Hagar was. She was a foreign slave, a woman with no power, used as a means to someone else's end, mistreated, and now alone and pregnant in the desert. By every social measure she was at the very bottom, the kind of person the world steps over. And it is precisely she whom God seeks out.

Mark that God came to her. The angel of the LORD finds her, calls her by name, and addresses her by her role with dignity. God initiates; Hagar did not summon Him. This is the consistent pattern of God's heart in Scripture: He draws near to the lowly, the mistreated, and the brokenhearted (Psalm 34:18; Psalm 68:5–6).

Note that God's compassion does not bypass hard instruction. He tells Hagar to return and submit, a hard word, but He wraps it in a promise and the assurance of His attention. God's tenderness toward the suffering is not sentimental; it is real care that also calls her to a difficult but ultimately better path.

Apply it as comfort and as a call. As comfort: no one is beneath God's notice; the people the world discards are precious to Him. As a call: God's people are to share His heart for the overlooked, the used, and the mistreated, refusing to step over those the world ignores.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's initiative toward the powerless and overlooked
- His consistent nearness to the lowly and brokenhearted (Psalm 34:18; 68:5–6)
- Compassion that still includes hard but good instruction
- God's heart for the outcast as a call to His people

Discussion Prompts

- Who was Hagar by the world's measure, and whom did God seek out?
- What does it tell us that God came to her rather than waiting to be summoned?
- How should God's heart for the overlooked shape ours?

Question 6

Student Question:

Hagar was powerless, mistreated, and easy to overlook, yet God saw her and came to her. Where in your life do you feel unseen, overlooked, or treated as expendable? How does it change things to believe that the God who found Hagar in the desert sees you there too?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Acknowledge the ache this question may touch. Many people carry a quiet sense of being invisible: the caregiver no one thanks, the faithful worker passed over, the lonely person, the one whose suffering goes unnoticed. Hagar's story speaks directly to them.

Press the comfort of being seen. The God of the whole universe sought out one slave woman by one desert spring and called her by name. The same God sees the person who feels overlooked in the room. We are not lost in the crowd to Him; He knows us individually and attends to our affliction.

Move from comfort to endurance. Believing we are truly seen by God changes how we carry an unnoticed burden. We no longer need everyone else to validate our pain, because the One who matters most already has. Invite each person to name where they feel unseen and to bring that place deliberately before the God who sees.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The common experience of feeling invisible or expendable
- God's individual attention to each person
- Being seen by God as the deepest validation

- How being seen changes the way we endure hidden burdens

Discussion Prompts

- Where do you most feel unseen or overlooked?
- How does it change that place to know God sees you there?
- What burden could you bring this week to the God who sees?

Question 7

Student Question:

Hagar named the LORD “a God of seeing,” saying, “Truly here I have seen him who looks after me” (v. 13), and the child was named Ishmael, meaning “God hears.” What does it mean for our faith that God is the One who genuinely sees the afflicted and hears their cry, and how should that shape the way we endure hardship?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Linger on the name Hagar gives God, because it is remarkable. A foreign slave woman becomes the only person in Scripture to name God, and the name she gives Him is “the God who sees me.” Out of her affliction she discovers something true about God’s very character: He sees.

Pair it with the name Ishmael, “God hears.” Together the two names declare that God is neither blind nor deaf to human suffering. He sees the affliction we think no one notices, and He hears the cry we think disappears into the air. This is woven into the names Hagar’s family will carry.

Draw out the difference this makes for endurance. The hardest part of suffering is often the sense that it is meaningless and unwitnessed. To know that God sees and hears does not remove the hardship, but it removes the loneliness and the futility. Our tears are collected (Psalm 56:8); our cries reach a Father who attends to them.

Caution against a false expectation. Being seen and heard does not guarantee immediate rescue; God sent Hagar back into a hard situation with a promise. Faith trusts that the God who sees is also working, even when He calls us to endure. Seen, heard, and held is enough to keep walking.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God’s character revealed as the One who sees (El Roi)
- Ishmael, “God hears,” as a declaration of God’s attentiveness
- How being seen and heard removes the loneliness and futility of suffering
- God collecting our tears and hearing our cries (Psalm 56:8)
- Being seen does not always mean immediate rescue, but it sustains endurance

Discussion Prompts

- Why is it striking that Hagar is the one who names God?
- How does knowing God sees and hears change the experience of suffering?
- Why is being seen by God enough to keep walking, even without immediate rescue?

Question 8

Student Question:

Knowing that God sees and hears can change how a person carries a heavy season. Is there a burden you have been carrying as though no one notices? What would it look like this week to live as someone who is truly seen and heard by God, even if no one else seems to notice?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Make the truth of the previous question practical. It is one thing to affirm that God sees and hears; it is another to live as though it were true when we feel alone in a hard stretch. Help the class identify the specific burden they have been carrying as if unwitnessed.

Suggest concrete ways to live as the seen and heard. Pouring out the burden to God in honest prayer rather than silent resignation; refusing to measure our worth by human recognition; serving faithfully in the unseen places, knowing the Father who sees in secret will reward (Matthew 6:4). These are the habits of a person who believes God is watching with love.

Encourage one tangible step. Perhaps it is a daily, honest prayer about the burden; perhaps it is choosing to keep doing the right but unnoticed thing without bitterness. The aim is to translate the comfort of El Roi into a changed way of carrying the week.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Living in the truth that God sees, not just affirming it
- Pouring out burdens in prayer rather than silent resignation
- Refusing to base our worth on human recognition
- Faithfulness in the unseen places (Matthew 6:4)

Discussion Prompts

- What burden have you been carrying as if no one notices?
- How would living as the seen and heard change how you carry it?
- What is one tangible step toward that this week?

Question 9

Student Question:

Ishmael was a real son, and God showed him mercy, yet he was the child of human scheming rather than of promise, and the conflict born from that shortcut would echo for generations (v.

12). Paul later uses Hagar and Sarah to contrast the child “born according to the flesh” with the child “born through promise” (Galatians 4:21–31). What does this passage teach about the lasting consequences of trusting the flesh and our own efforts, the faithfulness of God to His true promise despite our failures, and the difference between what we manufacture and what God graciously gives?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest doctrinal block, and it has several threads to weave. Begin by honoring Ishmael’s humanity, because Scripture does. He is a real son; God hears him, blesses him, and makes him a great nation. The contrast Paul will draw is theological, not a disparagement of Ishmael or his descendants. Make this clear so the class never uses the passage to demean people.

Establish the first truth: trusting the flesh has lasting consequences. Ishmael was the product of human effort to secure God’s promise, and the conflict surrounding him would echo for generations (v. 12). Our shortcuts, even when God shows mercy within them, set in motion complications that endure. Sin and self-reliance leave a long wake; grace forgives, but consequences often remain.

Establish the second truth: God remains faithful to His true promise despite our failures. The manufacturing of Ishmael did not cancel the promise of Isaac. God did not say, “Since you ran ahead, the deal is off.” He held to His word and would give, in His own time, the child of promise. This is enormously comforting: our impatience can complicate God’s plan in our experience, but it cannot defeat His faithfulness.

Now develop Paul’s contrast in Galatians 4:21–31, because it gives the passage its deepest doctrinal payload. Ishmael, born according to the flesh, represents what human effort and law-keeping can produce. Isaac, born through promise, represents what God graciously gives. Paul uses this to teach that we are children of promise, born of grace, not children of the flesh trying to secure standing by our own works. What we manufacture by the flesh is never the same as what God gives by promise. This dovetails with the whole study: salvation is God’s gracious gift received by faith, not a product we engineer.

Close by guarding against two errors and pointing forward. Do not let the contrast between flesh and promise be read as a contrast between human passivity and divine action that makes obedience irrelevant; the obedient faith of Abraham is still the model, and Isaac’s line will be called to walk with God. And do not let it become contempt for any people. The lesson is that we cannot secure God’s blessings by fleshly shortcuts; we receive them by grace, through a faith that waits on and trusts God. The promised Seed who finally fulfills it all is Christ, in whom the children of promise are gathered (Galatians 3:16, 29).

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Honoring Ishmael's humanity; the contrast is theological, not a disparagement of persons
- The lasting consequences of trusting the flesh and our own efforts
- God's faithfulness to His true promise despite our failures
- Galatians 4:21–31, the child of the flesh versus the child of promise
- What we manufacture by effort versus what God graciously gives
- Salvation as God's gracious gift received by an obedient, waiting faith, not engineered by works

Discussion Prompts

- Why must we honor Ishmael even as we note the flesh-versus-promise contrast?
- How can our shortcuts complicate God's plan without defeating His faithfulness?
- What is the difference between what we manufacture and what God gives by promise?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across the whole chapter. You have watched faithful people grow impatient and manufacture a costly shortcut, and you have watched God show mercy to the very person their shortcut wounded. Name one specific way Jesus is forming you through this part of Abram's story. Where is He calling you to wait on Him, to trust His timing, or to rest in the God who sees, this week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Bring the lesson to a personal point. Some need to repent of a shortcut and return to waiting on God; some need to own damage they have caused; some need to rest in the God who sees them in an unnoticed season. Press for one specific response, not a general sentiment.

Connect it to Jesus. Where Abram and Sarai grasped at the promise by the flesh, Jesus waited in perfect trust, refusing every shortcut the tempter offered to seize the kingdom without the cross (Matthew 4:8–10). And the God who saw Hagar is the same God who in Christ sees and seeks the lost and lowly. Being formed into Christ's image means learning His patient trust and sharing His seeing heart.

End with hope. The God who kept His promise despite Abram's shortcut, and who met Hagar in the desert, is faithful and attentive still. The class can wait in confidence and endure as the seen and heard.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Moving from the lesson to a concrete response of waiting, owning, or resting
- Jesus' patient trust that refused every shortcut (Matthew 4:8–10)
- Christ's seeking heart toward the lost and lowly

- Confidence in God's faithfulness and attentiveness

Discussion Prompts

- Where is God calling you to wait on Him this week?
- How does Jesus' refusal of shortcuts encourage your own waiting?
- Where do you most need to rest in the God who sees?