

Abraham: The Father of the Faithful

Lesson 5: Running Ahead of God: Hagar and Ishmael -- Genesis 16

Ten years have passed since God promised Abram a son, and the cradle is still empty. Ten years of watching the moon turn, of counting the seasons, of Sarai's quiet grief each month when hope comes to nothing. The God who showed Abram the stars and said, "So shall your offspring be," has said nothing new. The promise has not been withdrawn, but it has not arrived either, and waiting this long does something to the soul. It tempts even faithful people to stop waiting and start fixing.

So Sarai does the math. She is barren; she is not getting younger; and there is a culturally acceptable solution close at hand. "Go in to my servant," she tells Abram. "It may be that I shall obtain children by her." It is not scandalous in their world; it is a recognized arrangement, a sensible plan, a way to help the promise along. And the text says something haunting in its echo of Eden: "And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai." Just as Adam listened to the voice of his wife and ate, Abram listens and acts. The man of faith reaches out to manufacture by his own hand what God had promised to give.

And it works, in the worst way. Hagar conceives, and almost immediately the household fractures. Hagar looks on her mistress with contempt; Sarai turns bitter and blames Abram; Abram washes his hands of it; Sarai deals so harshly with the pregnant servant that Hagar runs away into the wilderness. One shortcut, and a home is at war. The plan to help God produced nothing but heartbreak, rivalry, and a fleeing, pregnant woman alone in the desert with nowhere to go.

But the wilderness is exactly where the most beautiful thing in the chapter happens. The angel of the LORD finds Hagar by a spring of water, this used and discarded slave woman, and calls her by name. He hears her affliction; he gives her a promise; he sends her home with hope. And Hagar, stunned that God would notice someone like her, gives Him a name no one had ever spoken before: "You are a God of seeing." The God who sees the overlooked. This chapter shows us what our impatience costs, and it shows us a God whose mercy reaches even into the mess our impatience makes.

Group Discussion: Abram and Sarai had a real promise from God, but after ten years of waiting they decided to help it along by their own plan. Why is waiting on God so often harder than obeying Him in a single dramatic moment? What pressures tempt us to take God's promises into our own hands rather than trust His timing?

Personal Reflection: Think about an area where you are tired of waiting on God: a relationship, a prayer, a longing, a season that has dragged on far longer than you expected. Where are you tempted, like Sarai, to engineer your own solution rather than keep trusting God's timing? What is your "Hagar plan," the shortcut that looks reasonable but runs ahead of God?

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?
6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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?

10. 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?

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Genesis 21:8–21, where the rivalry comes to a head and God again hears the cry of Hagar and Ishmael; Galatians 4:21–31, Paul's use of Hagar and Sarah to contrast the child of the flesh with the child of promise; Isaiah 40:31, those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength; Psalm 139:1–12, the God who sees, knows, and is present everywhere; James 1:2–4, letting steadfastness have its full effect