

## **Genesis 16:1-6**

### **Family Strife**

I hold it as my premise this morning that it is easier to demonstrate faith than patience. That is to say, I believe that it is easier to have confidence that God will do something - work in a certain way, provide for our needs, etc. - than to wait patiently for His perfect timing to do it.

For example, we all know that “He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus” (Philippians 1:6). However, we are usually not very patient when God’s work in the lives of our children, or our spouse, is slow and progressive rather than certain and immediate. We look at our seven-year old and frustratingly say, “when are you going to grow up?” Even for ourselves, we struggle to understand that sanctification is a process and that it takes time for our sinful, worldly selves to be transformed into the image of the Son of God.

Another example is that “we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose” (Romans 8:28). Yet, when God chooses to allow a time of suffering or testing to provide an opportunity for us to mature in our faith, we rarely accept it uncomplainingly. We know He do work things out for our good and His glory, but we want Him to do that now. We want the ends achieved without the process.

So it was with Abram. Abram had trusted God. He had left his homeland to go to a land he did not know, and he believed that God would one day give him that land. He had trusted God for protection when he boldly went to fight the four invading kings who had taken his nephew Lot captive. He had believed God when God promised that though Abram was a relatively old man, his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky. Through it all, Abram had faith and, perhaps more importantly, Abram had acted on that faith.

But at times Abram was not patient. He wanted some control in the fulfillment of those promises. When in Egypt, and Abram doubted God’s protection, he offered his wife to Pharaoh by claiming she was his sister. Perhaps, Abram reasoned, this might be the way to preserve his own life and thus help God’s promises to come to fruition. Then, back in Canaan, and having been assured that a foreigner would not be his heir “but one who will come forth from your own body, he shall be your heir” (Genesis 15:4), Abram was challenged to wait upon the Lord to fulfill His promises. As we will see today, sadly, he did not wait long enough. Abram trusted God, but Abram also struggled to wait upon the Lord.

So after having demonstrated faith in trusting God to fulfill His promises (Genesis 15:6), and having witnessed the extraordinary event of God ratifying His covenant with Abram by passing through the sacrificed animals (Genesis 15:17), Abram now participated in a sordid plot hatched by his wife to help God fulfill His promises.

### **The Perceived Problem**

To Abram, the issue was clear. He had been promised descendants, and yet “Sarai, Abram’s wife had borne him no children” (v. 1). Abram had been promised by land and seed, yet the inheritance was predicated upon Abram having children to whom he could pass on the land. As the biblical narrative begins, a new person is introduced into the narrative. She is described simply as “an Egyptian maid whose name was Hagar” (v. 1).

Hagar was a slave, and as Sarai’s slave, Hagar was completely under her authority. How Hagar had been acquired or how long she had served Sarai is not stated. While it is possible that Hagar was part of the marriage dowry received from Abram as part of their marital agreement, it is also possible that she may have been acquired from Egypt when Abram and Sarai sojourned there. If the latter is the case, that is if in fact Hagar was part of the great wealth acquired by Abram when he misrepresented his wife as his sister, then that particular sin had ramifications years later.

Though slavery became common to Israel - they both owned slaves and eventually were slaves - the institution was not without its tensions.

“Behold, as the eyes of servants look to the hand of their master,  
As the eyes of a maid to the hand of her mistress,  
So our eyes look to the Lord our God,  
Until He is gracious to us” (Psalm 123:2).

“<sup>21</sup>Under three things the earth quakes,  
And under four, it cannot bear up:  
<sup>22</sup>Under a slave when he becomes king,  
And a fool when he is satisfied with food,  
<sup>23</sup>Under an unloved woman when she gets a husband,  
And a maidservant when she supplants her mistress” (Proverbs 30:21-23).

The latter was perhaps written while the author was thinking of the episode we are studying today.

### **The Proposed Solution**

As the narrative unfolds, both women are suffering. Sarai suffers because she is barren, and Hagar suffers because she is a slave. While the suffering of Hagar is of no consequence, Sarai places the responsibility for her suffering directly on God. Her inability to have a child is clearly God’s fault. As she explained to her husband, “now behold, the Lord has prevented me from bearing children” (v. 2). It is the same idea as that expressed later in Genesis, when “the Lord had closed fast all the wombs of the household of Abimelech” (Genesis 20:18). That was in consequence of Abimelech having unknowingly taken Sarai into his household because again, Abram had told Abimelech Sarai was his sister.

However, no reason is given by Scripture for Sarai’s barrenness. Such a condition could be a sign of divine displeasure as in the case of Abimelech, but no such mention of God’s anger is made here. That was not unusual. The same was true of a later heroine of the faith, Hannah (1 Samuel 1:5). The point here is not that Sarai had not had children because she had sinned against the Lord, but rather that Sarai

had not had children because it was God's will that she not yet have children. In other words, Scripture emphasizes that God is the ultimate source of life, as He is of all life's experiences. At least Sarai recognized this.

But even understanding that God is the source of life, Sarai took it upon herself to try to solve the problem of not having given Abram children. She told her husband, "please go in to my maid; perhaps I will obtain children through her." (v. 2). Notice that Sarai never spoke to Hagar. Nor does either she or Abram refer to her by name. She was a slave. She was not involved in the decision making process. Her opinion was neither sought nor considered. She was merely a tool to relieve Sarai's problem of not having borne a child to Abram. In fact, so beneath her was Hagar to Sarai, that Sarai would never claim Ishmael as a son. That was unusual as in general, children (especially sons) born to concubines, were recognized by the wife as their own children. For example, later in patriarchal history,

"<sup>1</sup>When Rachel saw that she bore Jacob no children, she became jealous of her sister; and she said to Jacob, 'give me children, or else I die.' <sup>2</sup>Then Jacob's anger burned against Rachel, and he said, 'am I in the place of God, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?' <sup>3</sup>She said, 'here is my maid Bilhah, go in to her that she may bear on my knees, that through her I too may have children.' <sup>4</sup>So she gave him her maid Bilhah as a wife, and Jacob went in to her. <sup>5</sup>Bilhah conceived and bore Jacob a son. <sup>6</sup>Then Rachel said, 'God has vindicated me, and has indeed heard my voice and has given me a son'" (Genesis 30:1-6).

And Rachel's sister, Leah did the same (Genesis 30:20). But this was simply a means to an end. Sarai simply told Abram to "go in to my maid; perhaps I will obtain children through her" (v. 2).

"Abram listened to the voice of Sarai" (v. 2). As in the Fall, similar language was used to describe Abram's misguided agreement with his wife's plan and His willingness to submit to her authority rather than strongly wait upon the Lord. Abram lacked patience. To be sure, the couple had been in Canaan for a long time. Scripture records that "after Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Abram's wife Sarai took Hagar the Egyptian, her maid, and gave her to her husband Abram as his wife" (v. 3). But God's timing cannot be hurried. Impatient as Abram and Sarai might have been, the irony was that the birth of the promised son, Isaac, was still fifteen years away.

But can Sarai's and Abram's actions be justified? That is, can one make a case that they were merely using tools (after all a slave was, as Aristotle so succinctly put it, a human tool) that God had given them to be good stewards of their responsibility to have children? Perhaps, this was the method by which Abram was to have an heir. Such an action was common in the ancient world. Hammurabi's Law Code for ancient Babylon, the Nuzi texts of ancient Mesopotamia, and Assyrian manuscripts all attest to the practice of taking from the slaves a wife, if the woman to whom a man was married was unable to produce an heir. Thus, for an infertile wife to provide a surrogate was a common practice in the ancient world. And the idea of concubinage was common for another two millennia. Even St. Augustine had a concubine. Furthermore, that it was the woman who was considered infertile if a couple could not conceive was due to the fact that the male portion of the reproductive process was physically evident. Thus if the man could produce semen, and a couple could not conceive, it must be because the woman could not bear a child.

Thus, it may have seemed to Sarai that her options were limited. She had the responsibility for bearing a child to Abram. After all, the promises of God were predicated upon a child being born. Sarai had to either provide a substitute by which the promised offspring could be conceived, or she had to wait patiently upon the Lord to fulfill His promises. She must have believed that her condition was permanent, and that God had provided Hagar for the purpose of being used to conceive the child. We can appreciate the rationalization of Sarai's mind and she worked through the process.

Yet the actions of Sarai and Abram cannot be justified. Their plan was clearly contrary to God's plan for marriage. That plan had been clearly explained in the beginning, "for this reason a man shall leave his father and his mother, and be joined to his wife; and they shall become one flesh" (Genesis 2:24). Yet the Fall of man had ruined everything, and that included the institution of marriage. Within a few generations Scripture records the boast of Lamech,

“<sup>23</sup>Lamech said to his wives,  
‘Adah and Zillah,  
Listen to my voice,  
You wives of Lamech,  
Give heed to my speech,  
For I have killed a man for wounding me;  
And a boy for striking me” (Genesis 4:23).

While much can be said about this passage, my point here is that Lamech is said to have had two wives. Polygamy had become a part of the institution of marriage. In a replication of the Abram-Sarai-Hagar scenario, both Rachel and Leah who also offered their slaves to Jacob as a means of providing children and raising their status in the household. Nevertheless, multiple wives often posed a serious threat to the household and undermined the stability of the family. For example,

“<sup>30</sup>So Jacob went in to Rachel also, and indeed he loved Rachel more than Leah, and he served with Laban for another seven years. <sup>31</sup>Now the Lord saw that Leah was unloved, and He opened her womb, but Rachel was barren” (Genesis 29:30-31)

“<sup>7</sup>If a man sells his daughter as a female slave, she is not to go free as the male slaves do. <sup>8</sup>If she is displeasing in the eyes of her master who designated her for himself, then he shall let her be redeemed. He does not have authority to sell her to a foreign people because of his unfairness to her. <sup>9</sup>If he designates her for his son, he shall deal with her according to the custom of daughters. <sup>10</sup>If he takes to himself another woman, he may not reduce her food, her clothing, or her conjugal rights” (Exodus 21:7-10)

“<sup>15</sup>If a man has two wives, the one loved and the other unloved, and both the loved and the unloved have borne him sons, if the firstborn son belongs to the unloved, <sup>16</sup>then it shall be in the day he wills what he has to his sons, he cannot make the son of the loved the firstborn before the son of the unloved, who is the firstborn. <sup>17</sup>But he shall acknowledge the firstborn, the son of the unloved, by giving him a double portion of all that he has, for he is the beginning of his strength; to him belongs the right of the firstborn” (Deuteronomy 21:15-17).

The idea of polygamy became accepted among the people of God. Though never right in the eyes of God, it was still a part of the culture. Not counting the patriarchs, there are seven others in Scripture who had concubines. Caleb (1 Chronicles 2:46), Gideon (Judges 8:31), a Levite (Judges 19:1), Saul (2 Samuel 3:7), David (2 Samuel 5:13), Solomon (1 Kings 11:3) and Rehoboam (2 Chronicles 11:21). Indeed, four of these seven are kings, including Israel's three greatest rulers. Their concubines bore them children, did household chores, and in many ways fulfilled the role of wife.

Yet they were not called wives. The Hebrew term for wife is *'iššâ*. The term for concubine is *pilegeš*. Those terms are not interchangeable, and Scripture makes a clear distinction in each of the seven cases mentioned above. That is, a concubine might perform the same duties as a wife, she may even have a greater share of the man's affection, but she was not, nor could she ever be, considered his wife.

However, it was not so with Abram. Hagar is referred to as Abram's *pilegeš*, that is concubine, in Genesis 25:6. Yet in Genesis 16:3, she is referred to as his *'iššâi*, or wife. This may though, be a matter of language. Perhaps at the time Moses was writing Genesis, there did not exist linguistically that distinction of terms. That is, this may be less a matter of theology than linguistics. But whatever Hagar was called, Sarai and Abram had clearly broken the God-established boundaries of marriage.

### **The Problem Created**

The text does not explicitly condemn Abram for his actions in having a son through Hagar. Perhaps it did not need to. That Abram "listened to the voice of Sarai" was reminiscent of the Garden, where Eve offered the forbidden fruit to Adam, and he took it and ate (Genesis 3:6). And again, Hagar, as a slave, had no voice in the matter. She was given by her mistress Sarai, and taken by her master Abram.

Scripture records the act tersely, "He went in to Hagar, and she conceived" (v. 4). There is no indication that the interaction between Abram and Hagar was anything other than procreative. No words are spoken, at least none are recorded. There is no intimacy or affection mentioned. This was a matter of producing an heir, nothing more. Though, again, it may have been that way for Abram and even Sarai, it is difficult to believe that Hagar felt the same about it.

Hagar had no difficulty in becoming pregnant. Scripture records plainly and without comment that Abram "went in to Hagar, and she conceived" (v. 4). Sarai's plan had worked. Yet upon recognizing that she had been able to conceive a child by Abram when her mistress had not, perhaps not unnaturally "her mistress was despised in her sight" (v. 4). It was simply the fact that she had been able to conceive when Sarai had not that was the problem. We must remember that whatever the cause, barrenness in a Jewish woman was considered a sign of God's disapproval. Sarai had not thought her plan through, any more than Abram had when he told Pharaoh that Sarai was his sister. In both cases, things unfolded in ways quite unexpected. Sarai had been humiliated by the successful completion of her own plan.

Sarai now saw Hagar as a threat to her place in the house. She would later see Ishmael as a threat to her own son, Isaac, "now Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, mocking. <sup>10</sup>Therefore she said to Abraham, 'drive out this maid and her son, for the son of this maid shall

not be an heir with my son Isaac” (Genesis 21:9-10). In other words, when God did bless Sarai with a child, her previous actions continued to haunt her.

Sarai considered herself wronged by Hagar, and she was not shy about Abram about it. In her mind it was all Abram’s fault. “Sarai said to Abram, ‘may the wrong done me be upon you. I gave my maid into your arms, but when she saw that she had conceived, I was despised in her sight. May the Lord judge between you and me” (v. 5). The expression of Abram’s face at this revelation can only be imagined. And also notice again that Hagar still was not referred to by name.

Sarai’s placing the blame on Abram seems illogical on many levels, not the least is that offering Hagar to Abram was Sarai’s idea and it did, if fact, achieve Sarai’s desired purpose of providing a child. But Abram is forced to defend himself. And he does so by abdicating any responsibility. He responded with the same weakness and lack of leadership he had demonstrated in taking Hagar at Sarai’s invitation in the first place.

Instead of being bold and faithful, Abram throughout this entire sordid episode had been passive and unstable. He meekly told Sarai, “behold, your maid is in your power; do to her what is good in your sight” (v. 6). And, to be sure, Sarai took full advantage of Abram’s offer. “Sarai treated her harshly, and she fled from her presence” (v. 6). But, in fact, the text does not allow Sarai that privilege. The word Abram used when he told Sarai to “do to her what is good” is the word *hattôb*, means “the good.” That is, Abram did not give Sarai freedom to treat Hagar however she wished, but told her to do what was best for Hagar. Clearly, that is not what Sarai did.

Again we are reminded of the words of Agur,

“<sup>21</sup>Under three things the earth quakes,

And under four, it cannot bear up:

<sup>22</sup>Under a slave when he becomes king,

And a fool when he is satisfied with food,

<sup>23</sup>Under an unloved woman when she gets a husband,

And a maidservant when she supplants her mistress” (Proverbs 30:21-23).

### **Takeaways**

To be sure, we have a role to play in fulfilling God’s purposes in our lives. We were never meant to be passive in the Christian life or in working out God’s will. In fact, Scripture is filled with active metaphors for the faith,

“Fight the good fight of faith; take hold of the eternal life to which you were called, and you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses” (1 Timothy 6:12).

“Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us” (Hebrews 12:1).

“So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling” (Philippians 2:12).

But we must be discerning when trying to impose our timetable on God’s will. Scripture is the clearest boundary. We can never go against the direct and obvious understanding of the Bible in an attempt to try to do God’s will. To do so is a mere act of selfish rationalization of our sin.

The results of Abram’s decision were long lasting. Ismael’s descendants would be enemies and threats to Sarai’s own children throughout their history. In fact, the beginnings of Hebrew slavery in Egypt are rooted in the descendants of Abram and Hagar’s child.

“<sup>23</sup>So it came about, when Joseph reached his brothers, that they stripped Joseph of his tunic, the varicolored tunic that was on him; <sup>24</sup>and they took him and threw him into the pit. Now the pit was empty, without any water in it. <sup>25</sup>Then they sat down to eat a meal. And as they raised their eyes and looked, behold, a caravan of Ishmaelites was coming from Gilead, with their camels bearing aromatic gum and balm and myrrh, on their way to bring them down to Egypt. <sup>26</sup>Judah said to his brothers, ‘what profit is it for us to kill our brother and cover up his blood? <sup>27</sup>Come and let us sell him to the Ishmaelites and not lay our hands on him, for he is our brother, our own flesh.’ And his brothers listened to him. <sup>28</sup>Then some Midianite traders passed by, so they pulled him up and lifted Joseph out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty shekels of silver. Thus they brought Joseph into Egypt” (Genesis 37:23-28)