

SLAVE TO SIN

Gen 16

In the last chapter, in Genesis 15, we saw last week: God had made Abram a promise and ratified that promise with an unbreakable one-sided covenant. I'm gonna do these things, and if I don't do these things, I will destroy myself. What's your side of this? What do you have to do to hold up your end of the bargain? Nothing. Literally nothing.

But he was also honest and realistic with Abram; he told him that it would take over 400 years for his descendants to possess the land God had promised them, but he also **SHOWED** Abram how serious he was in keeping his word by using a culturally contextualized ceremony that Abraham would have recognized as "I'm telling you this is a **BIG DEAL** and I'm **SHOWING** you how serious I am about keeping my word."

And then... even in light of all that God had done, and all that God had sworn to do,, people react in predictably **HUMAN** ways.

Now look – passages like these sometimes raise as many questions as they give answers. If you're ever looking for proof that the Bible is **NOT** just a rule book or an instruction manual for how we should live, look at narrative passages like Genesis 16. Because if we're **HONEST**, sometimes passages like this raise more **QUESTIONS** than they give answers.

So God has already said to Abram, “Your offspring are going to be as many as the stars in the sky.” And the VERY NEXT PART OF THE STORY, Sarai says, “Well, I don’t have any kids yet because I have never been able to have children, so here, why don’t you go sleep with my servant Hagar?” It says, verse 1: “Abram’s wife, Sarai, had not borne any children for him, but she owned an Egyptian slave named Hagar. 2 Sarai said to Abram, “Since the LORD has prevented me from bearing children, go to my slave; perhaps through her I can build a family.” And Abram agreed to what Sarai said.”

Sarai didn’t make this idea up on her own. In some cultures back then, this was a sanctioned and acceptable way of obtaining children. There’s evidence of this practice all the way from Cappadocia in what’s now Turkey, to the land to Ur in what is now Iraq, which is actually where Abram and Sarai were from. So it’s likely that it seemed to them a reasonable response to a biological or physiological reality. But to us who have read through Genesis to this point, this should be a red flag. At the end of Genesis 1, when God has introduced Adam to Eve, and Adam sings her this song where he says “At LAST, this is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh,” basically, “I have found my partner.” And the text says “Therefore a man (singular) shall leave his family and hold fast to his wife (singular).” So that’s red flag #1.

Red flag #2 is this – this is another thing that the hearer or the reader of Genesis should trip over – remember after Cain and Abel, at the beginning of Chapter 6, right at the beginning of

the Noah narrative, remember that part that most people think is about fallen angels mating with human women, where it says “When man began to multiply on the face of the land and daughters were born to them, 2 the sons of God saw that the daughters of man were attractive.” And I said that a lot of people, people smarter than me, have interpreted that to mean that fallen angels were having relations with human women, but I said that its eems more likely that this means that men from the righteous line, the offspring of the woman, were kind of looking at pagan women, from the offspring of the serpent, and saying, “Hey, check HER out.” To me, this is our first zoomed-in case study of that. Sarai’s servant Hagar was an Egyptian slave; they had probably obtained here when Abram and Sarai were in Egypt. So Sarai says, “Hey, check out my pagan slave. Maybe we can help God fulfill his promises to us with HER.”

It’s so easy for us to forget the promises of God and what he has already done for us. I guess Sarai forgot the part of the story where Abram told her that a literal flaming torch in a pot that no one was carrying walked itself up and down the aisle and a disembodied voice said, “I AM THE LORD.” Maybe, given THAT, maybe we might assume that something like infertility is kinda... in his control.

But no. She says, “I’ll fix it!” Abram, why don’t you go have sex with servant.” That way, I’ll get to build up some kids because once she has a kid, I’ll take it and raise it as my own.

To which Abram says, “No, that doesn't’ sound like a good idea at all. I realize that infertility is a really touchy subject with you, but THIS isn’t the way to solve it.”

No, he didn’t say that. He said, “Uh... ok.”

And Hagar. Her reaction – I would have understood if she was unhappy about what was going on, and I also would understand if she was like eventually ok with it, because she was now Abram’s wife, and that meant certain things, and she might even be happy that she was pregnant. But she took what was happening to her and used it as a way to actually look down on Sarai, to look at her with contempt. Not with righteous anger for getting pimped out, but with scorn because SHE had been able to get pregnant where Sarai hadn’t. So that’s great.

And then Sarai gets mad at Abram. Verse 5 – And Sarai said to Abram, “May the wrong done to ME be on YOU! I gave my servant to your embrace, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt. *May the LORD judge between you and me!*”

Oh, no, Sarai... you don’t really want that right now.

6 But Abram said to Sarai, “Behold, your servant is in your power; do to her as you please.”

So Abram doesn’t step up as the leader of his family, he just punts it back to Sarai... YOU deal with it.

So what does Sarai do? Apologize to Hagar? No. Reason with Hagar? No. Show Hagar how much this hurts her? No. What does Sarai do? Treats Hagar like crap until Hagar runs off.

No one is doing a great job.

And when we've JUST seen God make this beautiful promise to Abram, and THIS is everyone's reaction... it's so... validating.

Because these are just sinners. The people in the Bible, even the people who get huge chunks of the story told about them – they aren't heroes. They're fallen people. Like you and me.

And we sin at the DUMBEST times. We sin for the most unnecessary reasons. And we compound our sin with more sin.

We fail. We fail a LOT. And so often we fail when we absolutely didn't need to. Things are going well and we still choose the wrong path.

So here we see Patience vs Impatience

We see belief vs unbelief.

And we see two sins at play – Sarai's sin of impatience and Abram's failure to tell the story that God was telling.

And there's a parallel for this.

In the Garden of Eden, Eve wasn't yet created when God gave Adam his one rule. "The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it. 16 And the LORD God

commanded the man, saying, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, 17 but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.”

ABRAM was the one who heard God’s covenant.
His job was to be a PRIEST to his wife.
Sarai’s failure was a follower’s failure.
Abram’s failure was a shepherd’s failure.

ADAM was the one who heard God’s covenant.
His job was to be a PRIEST of his family, and his job was be a PROPHET, to be a MESSENGER, to tell God’s story as he had heard it into the place where he was supposed to be the servant leader.
Eve’s failure was a disciple’s failure of unbelief.
Adam’s failure was a shepherd’s failure.

Same thing here. Abram was the one who heard God’s covenant, and he’s had TEN YEARS to understand it and proclaim it.
His job was to be a PRIEST of his family, and his job was be a PROPHET, to be a MESSENGER, to tell God’s story as he had heard it into the place where he was supposed to be the servant leader.
Sarai’s failure was a disciple’s failure of unbelief.
Abram’s failure was a shepherd’s failure.

I said at the beginning that passages like this sometimes give us

more QUESTIONS than ANSWERS. Here's one – by the time of the New Testament, and throughout the last 2000 years in the history of the Christian church, the value of “one man and one woman” is an intrinsic part of our view of marriage. Bigamy, polygamy – these things are condemned in the Gospels and in the Epistles. So if God's law never changes, why isn't the idea of a man having multiple wives CONDEMNED in the Old Testament, but IS condemned in the New Testament? Was it a cultural change over the years or did God change the rules, or was it never ok?

You have to remember – these are DESCRIPTIVE texts. And DESCRIPTION is not the same as PRESCRIPTION. What I mean is – describing what someone did is not the same as saying, “Now go and do likewise.” Even when the Bible is writing about Old Testament saints, Old Testament heroes, it's not like we're expected to follow everything they do. As Sam Emadi from 9Marks put it, “Few characters in Scripture emerge as heroically as the apostles, but no one suggests the Gospel writers want us to imitate Peter's denial of Jesus.” So just because the Bible is describing something, doesn't mean we're supposed to take it as a guide for how we're supposed to live.

In Deuteronomy 17, Moses is proclaiming God's law about the future King of Israel, the man who was supposed to be the model Israelite, and it says “He shall not acquire multiple wives for himself, lest his heart turn away.”

Now this was taking place BEFORE God gave the full law to

moses to proclaim to God's People, so we might be inclined to give Abram and Sarai a break here. But as to the question of whether this is wrong or not – GOD's pattern from the beginning has been that marriage is between one man and one woman – similar but complimentary, in a union that the New Testament tells us is a tangible representation for us of how Christ relates to His Bride, his church.

But then we come to the question of WHY Sarai is doing this – because somehow the child that Hagar bears will be seen as... belonging to Sarai? Again, this was a common practice at that time and is still practiced in some places even today. The first wife has primacy and more legal rights than the second, third, or fourth wife does. Since the child is part of THE FAMILY, she as the first wife has some aspect of claim to ownership or motherhood, as the first wife and first mother of the polygamous family. It sounds very odd to us, but part of that is based on our modern Western notion that marriage is primarily about romance. That's not historically true, and (truth be told) it's not always the best thing to base marriage on).

So Sarai is trying to help things along. She either doesn't believe God will fulfill his promises, or doesn't trust him, or... something. But once Hagar gets pregnant, does this solve everything?

NO. It actually makes it WORSE. Much like when we try to help God along, when we try to take shortcuts... it often makes it worse. Now, God is pleased to use ALL human action in concert

to tell the story he is telling. We'll see this much later in Genesis, but when Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery, were they acting in line with how God calls his people to act? NO. But it was also part of the grand tapestry that God was weaving in his narrative of how he was going to rescue his people. But on the ground, in the moment, sin NEVER makes things better. So Hagar gets pregnant and Sarai, instead of feeling "built up," as she hoped, actually the OPPOSITE has happened – she feels torn down because Hagar is looking down on her. God has opened Hagar's womb where has hasn't opened Sarai's. And she says to her husband, "This is YOUR fault."

And our first reaction might be "Wait WHAT?" It's HIS fault? This was YOUR idea. She is lashing out in pain and seeking someone to blame other than herself. But of course, even though she's wrong, in a way she's right as we talked about earlier – this was her failure to trust God and Abram's failure to adequately proclaim and shepherd her into God's path for them.

But then Sarai does what so many of us do when we are in pain – she lashes out at someone of lower status than her. She lashes out as though making someone else suffer will ease her suffering. She does what so many of us do – she compounds sin with more sin.

And Genesis again subtly uses an outsider, a foreigner, to behave in the most GODly manner, to show GOD's people how often and how easily they stray from God. Yeah, Hagar might

have been boastful and maybe even mean in how she was viewing Sarai, but after she begins to get mistreated, she reacts in a pretty respectable way – she runs. I mean, what else was she going to do? The first wife, the privileged one with all the power, was making her life miserable. What else could she do but run.

But look how God pursues her. Look how he cares after her. Can you see that this is a picture of how he pursues us? Can you see that this is a picture of how he leaves the 99 to seek the one lost sheep?

Verse 7: The angel of the LORD, the messenger of God, the Mouthpiece of Yahweh, found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur. 8 And he said, “Hagar, servant of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?” She said, “I am fleeing from my mistress Sarai.”

“9 The angel of the LORD said to her, “Return to your mistress and submit to her.” 10 The angel of the LORD also said to her, “I will surely multiply your offspring so that they cannot be numbered for multitude.” This is VERY similar to a part of the blessing that God gave abraham.

In the ancient near east, being blessed with many offspring was one of the best blessings one could have. And God was telling Hagar that he was going to bless her. And he went on to prophecy about her son and his offspring. Now when it says in verse 12 “He will be a wild donkey of a man,” this is actually

more compliment than insult. It speaks to WHERE he will live, that he is more of a country boy than a city boy, but that he will be at home in the wilderness, independent and thriving, like how a donkey is adapted to survive in a harsh environment. In the Arab tradition, Hagar's son was the father of the Arab bedouins, who live away from cities or towns and who are always on the move

And the angel says one more thing – that her son is to be called “Ish-ma-el,” which means “God hears,” or “God pays heed,” because God heard Hagar's distress. But then why would God tell her to go back? The theologian John Goldingay put it this way:

“God pursues Hagar, who has escaped from ill-treatment and tells her to go back for more, and God calls that “paying heed to her ill-treatment”? So what would it be like to ignore her ill-treatment? Paradoxically, it would be to let her return to Egypt and disappear from the story. It would be not to make the kind of promise God goes on to make in declaring she will have numerous progeny. God has not taken her away from her ill-treatment and has rather sent her back for more, but has made it worthwhile. When you meet Hagar in heaven, I don't think she will be complaining about the aide's message.”

And so through their own attempts at helping God's story along, tragedy ensued, and God's grace was allowed to shine through, and another part of God's story got told. The descendants of Ishmael would end up being some of the tribes and nations that the Israelites encountered as they followed

God from Egypt into the promised land.

But this child was not the fulfillment of the promise. This child was not the “offspring” that God was referring to. Because GOD was going to do these things. God’s promises are not fulfilled by our own efforts.

GOD found Abram, this old man with an old wife who had never been able to have kids, and promised him something RIDICULOUS. Something MIRACULOUS. And God did not need Abram’s help or Sarai’s help or Hagar’s help to show forth his own glory. God has said over and over again, “I, *I* will do this.” And of course that culminates with the true and final child, the real and ultimate fulfillment of that promise that God made to Abram 4000 years ago – the REAL offspring through whom all the families of the earth would be blessed.

Just as it took a miracle, a special and extraordinary move of God, to give Sarai and Abram the son they intended, so it took a miracle, a special and extraordinary move of God, to give Mary and Joseph their son. Except even more. Because now GOD HIMSELF was going to come down. “I, I MYSELF WILL BE THEIR SHEPHERD,” God says in Ezekiel 34.

Then our mouths will be filled with laughter, and our tongues will be filled with shouts of joy. And we will proclaim to everyone around us, “The Lord has done great things!”

Sarai, resentful over her infertility – she went out to sow seed

while weeping, and she would reap with songs of joy.

Hagar, mistreated and abused by Sarai and Abram – she went out, LITERALLY, she FLED weeping, and she would reap with songs of joy.

And that's true for ALL of us – when you are wandering lost, before God grants you eyes to see and ears to hear, before he replaces your heart of stone with a heart of flesh – all of us are out in the field sowing seed while weeping, but when Christ came and began God's grand plan of redemption, well now we get to come in again with joy, bringing our sheaves with us.