

### 3. Giving God a Helping Hand

Dan Bidwell, *Senior Pastor*

Genesis 16:1-15

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#### **What are you waiting for?**

Have you ever had to wait for something in your life? I don't mean waiting in a queue, I mean waiting a long time. Like weeks or months or years... Have you ever had to wait for something, where you waited so long that you almost began to doubt that it might happen?

It's time to open the confessional. I'm terrible at waiting. I hate waiting for things.

I was thinking back through my life and some of the things I've had to wait for.

My wife Jo and I met when we were 16, right at the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> grade. I knew pretty quickly that I wanted to spend the rest of my life with Jo, but you can't get married at 16. So we waited 5 years to get married, until we were both 21. I remember, at the time, it felt like a long time to wait!

(Now we've been married 25 years and we've kind of forgotten about that waiting stage?)

There was another thing I remember waiting for – kids.

We have two kids – Charlotte and Jamie. Charlotte is in college now, and Jamie is a senior in High School. We didn't have kids right away, and when we decided we wanted kids, it took a while before Charlotte came along, then Jamie a few years later.

But the hardest waiting was when they were born. Both of them they went 2 weeks overdue, before they were finally born. I remember those 2 weeks dragging on when we had Charlotte, our eldest. It almost felt like she'd never arrive. (Kept asking Jo if she was in labour?)

But Charlotte did eventually arrive. And then we had exactly the same with Jamie – 2 weeks overdue, the longest 2 weeks of Jo's life I'd guess!

Well, in life we wait for lots of things. Me, I was lucky I guess that waiting to marry Jo and waiting for the kids to be born, they were both things that I could see. I was waiting for things that were within reach.

But what happens when the promise seems out of reach? When what you are waiting for seems like it's never going to happen?

In our sermon series we've been following the story of Abraham, and it's **a story of waiting**, isn't it?

God had made Abraham three promises – that he would bring him to a **land**, that he would make Abraham into a great **nation**, and that he would **bless** the whole world through Abraham.

But as we open up Genesis 16, 10 years have passed since God made that original promise to Abram. But Abram still doesn't possess the land. He still has no offspring, no heir.

**What do you do when the promise seems to be slipping out of reach? When you can't see how your waiting will ever come to an end? What do you do when God seems to have forgotten you?**

Let's pray then we'll dig into the Bible passage.

*Our heavenly Father, we are impatient creatures. Will you show us today that you see us, and you hear us, and that you will keep every one of your promises to us. Help us to trust you in our season of waiting, to the glory of your son Jesus. Amen*

Well the biggest obstacle to God's plan was that Sarah couldn't have children. How will Abram be the father of a great nation without an heir?

Abraham was 75 when God first called him and promised him Land, Nation and Blessing. Sarai was 65, and even then she had been unable to have children. Now it was 10 years later and neither of them was getting any younger.

Perhaps God had never planned that Sarah would be part of the promise... Perhaps there was another way that God was planning to grow a nation out of Abram.

In the last chapter, Abram had asked God how it would work... **Would God use Abraham's servant** Eliezer of Damascus to carry on the family line?

*<sup>3</sup> And Abram said (to God), "You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir."*

*<sup>4</sup> Then the word of the LORD came to him: "This man will not be your heir, but **a son coming from your own body** will be your heir." (Genesis 15:3-4)*

Abram believed God, but to make doubly sure God made a covenant with Abram to ratify the promise. God made a symbolic show of passing between pieces of dead animals to show that he was deadly serious about the promise...

That's the backstory. (It won't be your servant, Abram, but your son...)

## **Sarah**

Now chapter 16 begins with the reminder that Sarah had borne Abram no children... Perhaps **she** was the problem? Perhaps **her** infertility was preventing God's plans from being fulfilled? Perhaps God had meant that the heir would come from Abram's body, but not her own...

And so Sarai looks to her own servant – her young Egyptian slave – Hagar. Perhaps God had meant for this woman to bear the long-awaited son?

It was custom in that ancient culture that a woman could use her own maidservant as a surrogate to produce a legitimate heir, if she herself was unable. There was no law against polygamy, and down the track in Genesis we'll see Jacob marry two sisters Leah and Rachel, and then have more children through their maidservants Zilpah and Bilhah...

So at surface level there is nothing **unlawful** about what Sarah suggests.

But think a little deeper, just a few chapters ago Abram gave Sarah to the king of Egypt so he wouldn't be killed. He allowed his wife to be given sexually to another man – it's morally an outrage.

Now Sarai is giving **her** servant sexually to another man – as if Hagar were mere property, to be used as needed. It's true, that's how they thought about slaves back then. Does it make it morally right? No – it's an outrage. And Hagar has no choice in the matter, it seems.

For Sarah, the concern is building her family, not Hagar's welfare. Look back at v2. Sarah blames God for 'keeping her from having children' and so she looks to build her family a different way.

And even though Abram takes Hagar as his wife (16:3), they are not a happy 'throuple', not a happy family. There's a lot of resentment. Verse 4...

*[Abram] slept with Hagar, and she conceived.*

*When [Hagar] knew she was pregnant, she began to despise her mistress.<sup>5</sup> Then Sarai said to Abram, "You are responsible for the wrong I am suffering. I put my slave in your arms, and now that she knows she is pregnant, she despises me. May the LORD judge between you and me." (Genesis 16:4-5)*

Sarah's plan to build a family has backfired. A child will be born, but the family is falling apart.

Sarah's position as Abram's wife is undermined: and Hagar's status as a mere servant is elevated as she becomes Abram's second wife, and the mother of an heir.

Sarah strikes out at Abram, blames him for everything.

The whole scene sounds a lot like Adam and Eve in Genesis 3, doesn't it? Eve took the fruit and gave it to her husband, he took it. Sarah took her Egyptian slave Hagar and gave her to her husband. And he took her... Then everything was messed up...

## Abraham

What about Abraham? What did Abraham think about all this? After all, God had made the promise to him, not once, but twice, that he would have offspring from his own body, that he would be the father of nations. Perhaps his wife, Sarai was right – perhaps God meant him to have the child with the Egyptian girl, not the wife of his youth.

Really?

### **Men, what do *you* think?**

If we look at the way the story is told, right from the beginning, Abram's wife Sarai had been at his side, even before God made the three promises to Abram. We learned right back in ch11 that Sarah was childless. Some other translations say "barren" – it's a horrible expression. But she ***was*** Abram's wife – for better for worse, for richer for poorer. In sickness and in health. Why would Abram expect his heir to come from anyone but his own wife?

Especially after what happened in Egypt, when Abram had jeopardised Sarah's safety.

When Abram had let Pharaoh take Sarai into his harem, what did God do to Pharaoh? God struck Pharaoh with plagues until he gave Sarai back to Abram. Sarah is central to God's promises, but Abram is quick to look elsewhere.

When there was famine in Canaan, when the land was barren, Abram looked to Egypt for its fertile soils. And now in his wife's season of barrenness, Abram looks again to Egypt...

Married men, I think we need to pay close attention to what this story teaches us. Because there is a bit of Abram in all of us. When things aren't working out the way you thought they would, don't go looking elsewhere. Instead, look to the one who has been at your side since the beginning and remember the promises you made to her on your wedding day.

Abram frustrates me because he doesn't seem to fight for his marriage in this section of the story. Instead he is portrayed as a passive bystander.

His wife offers him a young slave girl, and he sleeps with her. Although he's heard God's voice promise him offspring, now he listens to his wife's voice (16:2) rather than trusting God's promise.

And then when the tension builds between the two women, what does Abram do?

He tells his wife, v6 *"Your slave is in your hands. Do with her whatever you think best."* Abram stands by passively while Sarai mistreats Hagar.

What do you make of this? This is a picture of a family in trouble. And, frankly, a man who doesn't seem to be standing up for what is right, and what is good. The Old Testament laws upheld the virtue of marriage in a way that Abram seems to have forgotten in his troubled season. The idea that a husband and wife are one flesh. The Apostle Paul applies that idea in the New Testament, saying that husbands are to love their wives as their own bodies. (Ephesians 5:28)

Men, I think the challenge of this chapter is to examine ourselves, and to see if we've fallen into the same kinds of behaviors. I know Jesus wasn't married, but in Jesus we see this model of love and care for women that is protective and restorative and compassionate. That's where the gospel should lead us, in all our relationships, whether it's our wives or our kids or just our friends. Jesus teaches us to do better.

Ladies, I feel I should say something to you about Sarai's behaviour. So I say this extremely carefully.

I think it might have been very difficult to be married to Abram. Perhaps all their married life, Abram had been resentful of Sarai's inability to have kids. It doesn't say that anywhere in the Bible, but perhaps Abram couldn't resist the chance to remind Sarai whose fault it was that they were still childless. The nasty comment when she was feeling down, the cheap shot. Twisting the knife in the open wound... Maybe.

Perhaps Abram was the model of supportive husband. Except when he gave his wife to a foreign king to save his own life. Twice. It would be easy to resent your husband for that, and it would be almost impossible to rebuild trust after that kind of betrayal...

It would be easy to keep reminding him of his failure, to keep blaming him. To belittle him. To ignore him.

And it would be easy to focus on building the family, the kids anyway, without making the effort to reconcile properly with your husband...

Ladies, does this sound like you? I hope I'm miles off the mark. But if you notice even the smallest resemblance in your behavior to Sarai's, then this passage might be speaking to you today. God might be speaking to you today. And leading you to do better as you follow the example of Jesus in all things...

That's enough of that for now. We have one more character to look at – Hagar.

## **Hagar**

Put yourself in Hagar's shoes. She is perhaps the innocent one in all this. She's an Egyptian slave, probably given to Sarai by the Egyptian Pharaoh when he sent Abram and Sarai away from Egypt... Slaves do what they're told... They didn't have rights in that society. They were like property, for the master to do with as he or she pleased.

But when Hagar was given to Abram, and he took her as his wife, not just a concubine – Hagar's place in the world went up a notch. She was carrying the child her mistress could not have. Perhaps she had become Abram's favourite... And so Hagar began to look down on the woman who owned her – it says in v4: *'she despised her mistress'*.

But Sarai would not be dethroned as the matriarch. She mistreated Hagar, put her in her place, while Abram did nothing about it. And so Hagar, frightened and pregnant, fled into the desert.

Hagar's story actually takes up more than half the chapter. I'm going to say almost nothing about it.

But what I want to say is this – even though Hagar is perhaps the least important character in this story, God treats her with the dignity that she never received as the slave of Sarai and Abram. See, God himself comes to Hagar at the spring on the road to Shur. It says 'the angel of the Lord' in v7, 9 & 11 but if you look at v13 Hagar knows it is the LORD himself who has been speaking to her.

And when the Lord comes to Hagar, he blesses her far beyond what her importance in the story would suggest she deserves. To the little slave girl from Egypt, God promises that he will give her more descendants than she can count. God gives Hagar a promise not dissimilar to the promise he gave Abram. She will be the mother of a great people, her son Ishmael the firstborn of the Arab peoples... That's the historical side of this promise to Hagar, which is accepted in Jewish and Christian and Islamic tradition.

But there's more to it than the interesting history. This is a story of God stepping into the lives of the little people. People like you and me.

In this story God tells us that he hears of our misery – that's what Ishmael's name means, but it could be our name. You might have been suffering loss or affliction or childlessness or suffering in a terrible marriage for years, and God has heard of your misery. You might be like Hagar, lost and alone and crying in the desert, but God has heard of your misery.

Look at what Hagar says to God – v13 – she says, *'You are the God who sees me.'* Hagar was right – we have a God who sees us and hears us and is ready to step into our lives to deal with our misery.

No matter how small we feel, no matter how unimportant our lives may look, God has already stepped into this world in the person of Jesus Christ, to deal with the messes we make of life, to deal with the injustices that affect our lives, and to show us that God cares. That God is with us. And that God is **for** us.



And we need to be reminded of that because we humans are impatient creatures. **We wait through the difficult seasons of life, and sometimes the waiting is so hard that we're tempted to give up on God.**

PAUSE

Brothers and sisters, God is bringing about his promises to Abraham even today, and through faith in Jesus we are recipients of the promise.

God doesn't promise us land, nation and blessing in the same way he promised it to Abram. Actually, his promise to us is even better!

You see, we live at the other end of the promise to Abraham – we live in the *fulfilment* of God's promise to bless the whole world through Abraham's family.

Through faith in Jesus, we are adopted into a **new family** – the church in this lifetime – and in the life to come, the family of all the descendants of Abraham. The great nation of God's forever people.

Through faith in Jesus, we'll be brought into **the true land of God's promise** – the new heavens and the new earth where we'll live with God forever.

And through faith in Jesus, **we will receive blessings** far beyond anything we could imagine, and far beyond anything we deserve.

You see, the world has sold us short on what it means to be blessed.

Blessing is often misunderstood as financial success (prosperity gospel). Or having family. Or children. Or good health.

But life doesn't always turn out like that? Does that mean you are cursed by God? No, I think it means you haven't understood what real blessing it.

Real blessing is what we receive when we put our faith and trust in Jesus.

In Ephesians 1 God tells us that in Jesus, we have received 'every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms...'

- We've been adopted as sons and daughters of God,

- redeemed through his blood,
- forgiven our sins,
- given understanding of God's will for our lives,
- sealed with the Holy Spirit as a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance on the day Jesus returns...

I began this morning by asking the question -

**What do you do when the promise seems to be slipping out of reach? When you can't see how your waiting will ever come to an end? What do you do when God seems to have forgotten you?**

We've seen this morning that God has not forgotten us, and that our waiting will come to an end, when Jesus returns if not sooner.

So brothers and sisters, take heart and trust in the God who sees you...

Let's pray.

