

The God Who Sees You
Genesis 16

Take your Bibles and turn to Genesis 16. We are a fast-paced people. We're always in a hurry to get from one place to another. Travel these days is not like it used to be. Horses weren't fast enough, so we had to invent the automobile. But the automobile was too slow, so we had to invent the airplane. The airplane was nice, but still we wanted to move faster, so we invented the rocket. Today, we travel around the world at a pace that would have astounded our ancestors. In a world where faster = better, I think we've pretty much forgotten how to wait.

One of the children's books we have at home is called, *"Waiting is not Easy."* The plot is very simple. Piggie has a surprise for Gerald, the elephant. Gerald is so excited to find out what the surprise is, but much to his consternation, Piggie says he will have to wait to find out. Here is the depiction of Gerald's response to said waiting:



The longer Gerald has to wait, the louder his groans become. I think we can all relate. We don't like to wait. Here's one of the problems we face in this life. God expects us to wait. God's plan for us involves our waiting upon Him. Waiting is a key component to a life of faith. Abram's life was largely defined by waiting. The promise of God came to him, and then he had to wait.

If you take a 20,000-foot view of the life of Abram and Sarai, one word that would describe it well is waiting. They waited, and waited, and waited. They left everything behind with nothing but the bare promise of God. The author of Hebrews says, **"⁸ By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. ⁹ By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents. (Hebrews 11:8-9a)** He lived as in a foreign land, even though it was the land God had promised to give him. You see, he didn't receive the things promised immediately. God

promises, then He expects us to wait and trust Him, even when it seems like His promises are impossible.

Because of our weakness, there are times when our faith wavers when things aren't going the way we think they should. Have you ever wanted something so badly, and yet you felt like God was withholding it from you? Have you ever felt frustrated with God for the way He is treating you? I think we've all been there. In Genesis 16, that is exactly where we find Abram and Sarai.

Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. (Genesis 16:1a)

This is a frustrating situation for Sarai. Verse 1 of Genesis 16 follows immediately on the heels of God's promise to give the land to Abram's offspring. That's where we left off last week at the end of Genesis 15. God sealed the covenant with Abram and promised the land would be given to his offspring. Now, at the start of chapter 16, Moses, the author of this text who is being carried along by the Holy Spirit, is intentionally juxtaposing the promise of God with the reality of Abram's and Sarai's situation. We are meant to see the difficulty, the seeming impossibility, of God's promise being fulfilled. How can God give the land to Abram's offspring when he has no offspring? The difficulty is compounded by the fact that Sarai is now past child-bearing age.

There are going to be times when your circumstances make it seem like God cannot fulfill His promises. In fact, I believe God often providentially guides us into difficult circumstances because He wants to make it clear to us that His promises do not depend on our own strength or ability. Was He not the one guiding the course of Abram's and Sarai's life? It is not just coincidence that God chose to give His promise of offspring as numerous as the sand on the seashore to this barren couple. This is one of the ways the Lord displays His power and tests our faith. He wants us to trust that nothing is too difficult for Him. He wants us to believe His promises in spite of our circumstances. He doesn't want us to follow the science. He doesn't want us to trust to our own devices. God is not ultimately interested in making us more prudent. Benjamin Franklin's adage, "God helps those who help themselves" is not it the Bible. That's not the teaching of the Bible. Rather, He wants us to simply believe that what He has promised will come to pass, and to live in childlike dependence upon His power to fulfill His promises.

Unfortunately, sometimes we stumble when our circumstances seem to stand in the way of God's promises. Here's what's starting to happen in Sarai's heart: she's growing bitter. The longer she waits, the more her bitterness grows. When we get bitter, we tend to take matters into our own hands, don't we?

She had a female Egyptian servant whose name was Hagar. (Genesis 16:1b)

The fact that Hagar was an Egyptian servant is not just thrown in there at random. Moses was writing this at a time shortly after the Israelites had been delivered out of Egypt. To the original readers of this text, Egypt represented the world and the ways of the world. If you remember in

Exodus, the Israelites often pleaded with Moses to go back to Egypt. During their wilderness wanderings, Egypt had an alluring quality because somehow, even though they were slaves there, they remembered the luxury and ease of their lives as slaves.

Also, Abram and Sarai had gone down to Egypt in the famine. Remember that the fact that Abram and Sarai even had an Egyptian servant is due to their own failures in Egypt during the famine. They had lied, saying that Sarai was Abram's sister, and the Lord had to intervene to deliver them out of a mess of their own making. They left Egypt with sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male servants, female servants, female donkeys, and camels that Pharaoh had given to Abram. That is likely how Hagar ended up in Abram's household.

Now, we all know the saying, "More money, more problems." It's true. I'm not so sure that all the possessions Abram and Sarai took from Egypt improved the quality of their life. To possess more in this world just leads to more stress and strife, doesn't it? This is especially true when our possessions have been gained by deception. Proverbs 10:2 says, "**Treasures gained by wickedness do not profit, but righteousness delivers from death.**" Take this as a warning from the Scriptures: possessions gained by sinful choices will rarely turn out to be good for us in the end.

Let's observe what happened next.

² And Sarai said to Abram, "Behold now, the Lord has prevented me from bearing children. Go in to my servant; it may be that I shall obtain children by her." (Genesis 16:2a)

Look, you don't need me to tell you this is a terrible plan. There is so much wrong with Sarai's scheme here. Notice that her scheme is connected to her frustration with the Lord. That's significant. She's not wrong in saying the Lord has prevented me from bearing children. It's a fact. It's true. But she's wrong in her response to what the Lord is doing. Later in the text, we'll see that they've been living in the land of Canaan for 10 years now. 10 years! That's a long time. Just let that sink in. I, at least, want to commend Sarai in this, she had already waited a long time for the Lord to open her womb. Think of the frustration that must have been mounting as she and Abram tried and tried and tried for 10 years to bear a child *after* the Lord had promised them a multitude of children. They can't even have one child, much less descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky.

After 10 years, she reached her breaking point. She was done! I'm done with waiting. Abram, why don't you just have a child with my servant, and we'll just pretend the child is mine. Now, this was probably customary back in those days, but just because something is a custom in this world does not make it right. Do not be conformed to the patterns of this world.

Now, we know that Abram is an upright man of faith. He certainly wouldn't take this advice from his wife, right?

And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai. ³ So, after Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her servant, and gave her to Abram her husband as a wife. ⁴ And he went in to Hagar, and she conceived. And when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress. (Genesis 16:2b-4)

The language here is intentionally similar to the language of Genesis 3:6, hearkening back to Adam and Eve in the Garden.

⁶ So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. ⁷ Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. (Genesis 3:6-7a)

Eve took the fruit; Sarai took Hagar. Eve gave to her husband; Sarai gave to her husband. And both Adam and Abram partook in what their wives gave them. Then the consequences followed. Notice that there are immediate consequences for sin in both passages (their eyes were opened and they knew they were naked in Genesis 3, and Hagar looked with contempt on her mistress in Genesis 16). Make no mistake, sin has immediate consequence in our lives. But we also know that there are far-reaching, long-term consequences that are still being felt to this day as a result of both of these sins. Adam's sin still affects us deeply today, for we are all born in sin because of it. Abram's sin still affects the world to this day, for the offspring of Hagar, as we will see later in this passage, will be at odds with the child of the promise, Isaac, who would be born later.

Abram failed miserably here. This was a clearly a moment when he should not have listened to the voice of his wife. This was a moment when he should have stepped up and lovingly embraced his wife and cared for her and sought to restore her from the bitterness. He should have perceived her plan as a cry for help. He should have reminded her that God's promises cannot fail. Sarai needed to be loved in this moment. So many marital problems stem from a passive husband treating his wife more like his mother than his wife. Don't misunderstand me here, this is not to say that husbands should not listen to their wives. Of course, we listen with a loving ear, but sometimes after we listen, no is the most loving answer. When a wife comes up with a plan that goes directly against good conscience and more importantly, against the Word of God, a husband has to lovingly lead, rather than passively follow.

Let me just remind you that this is the father of all who believe. The heroes of the Bible are not always so heroic, are they? For good reason, there is only one true Hero in this story. Jesus Christ is the only Hero, for we all fall short of the glory of God. Abram's failures are a stark reminder that all share in this sin-sickness, but his failures are also not the end of his story. Sarai's failures are not the end of her story. God is able to save sinners. God is able to fulfill His promises to us even when we fail. That is not to be an excuse for living in sin. But I say it as an encouragement to keep on trusting Him, even when you fail. Don't let your failures define you. Don't let them hold you back from repentance, from turning back to the Lord in quiet trust and patience and submission. As Isaiah says,

For thus said the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel,
“In returning and rest you shall be saved;
in quietness and in trust shall be your strength.”
But you were unwilling. (Isaiah 30:15)

Adultery has some serious consequences. It never leads to peace, only strife. Sarai somehow thought giving her husband another woman to bear a child for him would bring her what she was looking for. Pastor Jordan Rogers said this, “When you want something so bad that you will go around God to get it, you will get something, but it won’t be what you’re after.” Instead of obtaining a child by Hagar, she obtained contempt from her servant. Are we surprised? There was no possible way for this to work out well for Abram, Sarai, or Hagar. They have now set themselves up for a lifetime of trouble. George MacDonald said, “In whatever man does without God, he will fail miserably or succeed more miserably.” That’s what we see happening here. They got a child, but it is not the child of promise.

Hagar, apparently, became proud and began to look down on her barren mistress. Now, Sarai was an obstacle standing in the way between her and the father of her child. The relationship between Sarai and Hagar is now irreparably damaged. Notice that, even though this whole mess was not Hagar’s idea at all and she got sucked into it without any say in the matter, Hagar is still not an innocent victim in these affairs. Sin is working in Hagar just as it is working in Sarai and Abram. Contempt, malice, is not becoming.

Watch how Sarai responds to the contempt of Hagar.

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!” (Genesis 16:5)

This is so typical of what happens when sin makes a mess of our lives. We blame everyone but ourselves. Sarai blames Abram, but apparently can’t remember the fact that this was her idea to begin with. It’s easy to see Sarai’s blindness, but sin blinds us all in the same way. Charles Spurgeon said, “In nothing do men make more mistakes than concerning their own characters.” This is why Jesus told us not to judge others. We can’t even judge ourselves accurately, so why are we so confident in our ability to judge others. Sarai is not the innocent victim she thinks she is. She calls upon the Lord to judge between her and Abram, but I’m not so sure she will actually like the Lord’s judgment in this matter. But that’s just the thing: she’s so confident in her judgment that she invokes the Lord’s name, but it’s as plain as day to everyone else that she is culpable, just as much as Abram.

She is anything but right here to blame Abram and not accept any ownership for her own mistake, but Abram did have this coming. It was Victor Hugo who said, “Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.” Abram now has two women who will forever be at odds with one another

within his own house, and they will also be at odds with him. He can't un-ring that bell. There is no way around it. Sin produces corruption. It stirs up strife. It makes our lives miserable.

6 But Abram said to Sarai, "Behold, your servant is in your power; do to her as you please." Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she fled from her. (Genesis 16:6)

Once again, Abram is playing the passive husband. He should step in and seek peace and reconciliation. But he gives permission to his embittered wife to act out in her bitterness. What a mess! Now we have a pregnant woman fleeing alone. This whole situation has really spiraled downward into a catastrophic mess. We have come to the point at which things are spinning out of control. We have a bitter wife, a passive husband, a proud servant, and a fatherless child. The mother of Abram's son is now on the run from his household. She can't even live in the home of the man who fathered the child in her womb. What happens next, I think, is meant to be surprising.

7 The angel of the Lord found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur. (Genesis 16:7)

It appears Hagar is heading back towards Egypt, based on the fact that Shur is located between Canaan and Egypt. She is going back home, and she is utterly lost. Then, we are introduced to the hero of the story. The angel of the Lord found her! That's amazing! Here's an Egyptian slave woman no one seems to really care about all that much. Even Abram seems to be just using her to meet a need for his wife. Sarai has been cruel to her, and actually never even says her name. To Sarai, Hagar is just, "my servant." Hagar is an unloved woman. She carries bitterness, resentment, and feelings of unworthiness with her into the wilderness. She is pregnant and alone. Who finds her there? The angel of the Lord, which most scholars agree is none other than the pre-incarnate Christ, the second person of the Holy Trinity. Jesus Christ comes to find Hagar at her lowest point, at a spring of water in the wilderness. We certainly remember an encounter Jesus had with another woman at a well, don't we?



He has a way of finding the outcast. Our God loves to find that which is lost. It's His very nature to do so. And watch, He calls her by name.

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." (Genesis 16:8)

Can you imagine her surprise when she hears her name at this spring of water? There she is, alone, angry, hurt, in despair in the middle of nowhere, and out of nowhere, she hears, "Hagar." It's probably the last word she expected to hear—the word that communicates, "I know you. I see you. I care about you." And he asks her where she's come from and where she's going. Here, He is acting as a counselor. He knows where she's come from and where she is going. He wants to help her process her fear, her frustration, her bitterness, her pain. He wants her to be honest with herself. She is running away from her problems. She is not going to find what she is looking for in Egypt, any more than Sarai was going to find what she was looking for in giving Hagar to her husband. Egypt holds no hope for us. She's headed down a dead-end street. There is no future for us in Egypt—which is to say, there is no future for us in this world. Our life is a vapor, here today, gone tomorrow. The one who could give her a future was there meeting with her now. Her future met her when she had no future, and was now standing face-to-face with her. And He is going to ask her to do the hardest thing imaginable.

⁹ The angel of the Lord said to her, "Return to your mistress and submit to her." (Genesis 16:9)

What? Return and submit to the woman whom I hate, and who hates me? Yes, go face your problems. You will never get anywhere until you face those who have wronged you, until you have faced those you have wronged, and made amends. You cannot run from your past. You cannot avoid the pain. But Jesus can redeem you from it if you will let Him. His grace can free you to find forgiveness and healing.

Just as it was with Abram, the seemingly impossible call of God is coupled with the promise of God.

¹⁰ The angel of the Lord also said to her, "I will surely multiply your offspring so that they cannot be numbered for multitude." ¹¹ And the angel of the Lord said to her, "Behold, you are pregnant and shall bear a son.

You shall call his name Ishmael, because the Lord has listened to your affliction.

¹² He shall be a wild donkey of a man, his hand against everyone and everyone's hand against him, and he shall dwell over against all his kinsmen." (Genesis 16:10-12)

Wow! Just notice the similarity, first of all, between this promise to Hagar and the promise to Abram. In one sense, it's the same promise. God is going to multiply the offspring of Hagar. That is almost verbatim the same promise God made to Abram. Yet, there is a striking difference as well. The promise concerning *this* offspring is not that all the nations will be blessed through him, but that his hand will be against everyone and everyone's hand against him. It is a promise of ongoing strife and struggle. That was not a part of the original promise to Abram. Sin has real consequences. Just a few generations later, we would see Joseph sold by his brothers to Ishmaelite traders. Ishmael is the father of the modern Arab and Palestinian people. You need only turn on the news to see that this prophecy of the Lord continues to prove true.

God is both just and loving. At the same time that He is caring for Hagar, He is also saying that there will be far-reaching consequences for all the parties involved in this mess. Look at Hebrews 12.

¹⁴ Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. ¹⁵ See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no "root of bitterness" springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled. (Hebrews 12:14-15)

The outcome of this plan that started with a single bitter woman, a root of bitterness, is trouble for many. History shows that many have become defiled by this root of bitterness. Learn from this that even the smallest of choices can have vast consequences.

Now, watch how Hagar responds to the Lord.

¹³ So she called the name of the Lord who spoke to her, "You are a God of seeing," for she said, "Truly here I have seen him who looks after me." ¹⁴ Therefore the well was called Beer-lahai-roi; it lies between Kadesh and Bered.

¹⁵ And Hagar bore Abram a son, and Abram called the name of his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. ¹⁶ Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram. (Genesis 16:13-16)

Now, Hagar knows that she has been seen. Before this, no one had seen her. She was overlooked and unloved. But now, *God* has met with her. The God who hung the stars in the sky met personally with Hagar, of all people! Do you know what that feels like? To know that God takes a personal interest in you? He had met Hagar's deepest need. She needed to know that she was seen. She needed to know that someone cared about her. Not only does someone care about her, the One who made her cares about her. When you feel unloved, know that there is always One who looks after you. When friends and family have turned their backs on you, even when members of the church have hurt you, the Lord still loves you.

His promises will not fail. We have the benefit of knowing that His promises to Abram and Sarai came to pass. Isaac would be born. Through Isaac, the Savior of the world would come. Despite

this tragic mess that they made, the God of Abraham would remain faithful. Here's the promise held out to you today:

¹¹ For the Scripture says, "Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame." ¹² For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. ¹³ For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."
(Romans 10:11-13)

Don't grow bitter in the waiting. Don't let passivity keep you from obedience. Don't run from your problems. Don't hide from the only One who can heal you. Return and submit.

"In returning and rest you shall be saved;
in quietness and in trust shall be your strength."
(Isaiah 30:15a)