

Found in the Wilderness

Grace Fellowship | Ryan Limbaugh | Genesis 16:7-16

I am glad that it is well with my soul because it is not well with my heart rate right now. Woo! Good morning, church.

I want to remind us that in this moment that we have together opening up God's word, this is not about me having a tight, easy-to-absorb message where it's like how much of a preaching samurai I can be. And it's also not about you being a great note-taker and seeing how great notes you can take and how many little insights you can write down—however, that might be good and you might take great notes. What this moment is about is us having an encounter with the Almighty God. This is about us experiencing Him in His word, because when we receive His word, we are receiving Him. And so let's go to His word this morning with a sense of wanting to experience our God.

Before we look at the text, I want to make some comments. Nobody escapes this life unscathed by the effects of sin. Nobody. All of us experience hardship, suffering, frustration, anger, despair, pain, despondency to some degree or another. All of us are victims to some degree. I'll say it again: all of us are victims to some degree. A victim is a person who suffers from a destructive action or or an agency or a person. And all of us have suffered in some way, shape, or form. As a matter of fact, if—if we took the time, and it would take probably days to do that—but if we took the time for every person in this sanctuary to walk up and stand behind this pulpit and list the top 10 ways in which we have been a victim in this world, and we started and put them up on the screen from the 10th worst down to the 1st worst thing that have happened to each one of us, this is true: all of us would have significant compassion and mercy and pity for one another because all of us have experienced suffering to some degree.

But all of us are violators as well. A violator is somebody who acts against a person, against a law or a principle of law. To violate someone is to disrespect them, to desecrate them in a way. And I would say if we did the same thing and each of us walked right up here and stood and we listed the 10th worst thing that each of us has thought, said, or done in our lives all the way down to the first, we would each want to, after we have done that, to run out of this church building and not come back because we would be so ashamed and so embarrassed of ourselves.

So here we all are: we're victims and we're violators. But that's not all we are. As a matter of fact, that's not even an accurate way to describe who we are anymore. In Christ, we are victors. A victor is a person who has overcome or defeated an adversary, and in Christ, that is exactly what we are. Listen to the words of Almighty God through scripture:

"In this world you will have trouble, but take heart; I have overcome the world."

"Sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace."

"There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus our Lord."

"If God is for us, who can be against us?"

"We are more than conquerors through Him who gave Himself for us and loved us."

"Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

"God has given us not a spirit of fear but a spirit of power and of love and of self-control."

"Little children, little children, He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world."

Where does victory come from? It comes from having a life-changing experience with the triune God, in which you see Him for who He is, you listen to His words, to His message, you believe that message, and you turn your back on your former life and you turn your heart and your face toward His Son, Jesus Christ, and the new life that He has for you.

And so I want to take this opportunity right now to say to someone: you don't have to be defined by your victimhood. You—you don't have to frame the life that you have as someone who has been transgressed against and you don't know that you'll ever overcome it. And I want to say to someone right now: you do not have to be defined by your violations, your sins, and your transgressions. No matter how bad they are, no matter how much you perceive them to be unforgivable, God in Christ has come to say to you: don't take on the moniker of victimhood, don't take on the moniker of violation, but take on the moniker of a victor in Christ Jesus our Lord, because that's what He has won for you.

Now, with that reality, with that Gospel shape, I want you to be thinking about this reality. Uh—those—those shadows are still true in Genesis chapter 16. You see, you might be saying to yourself, "Ryan, that is really good and I believe it, but what does it have to do with Genesis 16?" And I would just say that I read Genesis 16 over and over and over and over again this week, and the one inescapable reality of this chapter is that there are no human heroes in this story. Like, I cannot stand up here and say, "Be like Abram! Be like Sarah! Be like Hagar!" because none of them escapes or stands above the awful effects of sin. And in some way, shape, or form, all three of these individuals that are in chapter 16 are victims on the one hand and violators on the other. And at the same time, they each have the capacity to be victorious in the person and promises of God.

So last week, Corey preached a great message called "The Cost of Control," and his big idea of the sermon was something like this: our circumstances can lead us to believe that we need to find a way to bring God's will to pass. And then he said, "This is not only untrue, but it also reveals a heart willing to manipulate circumstances and situations in order to

get what we want." And it was an excellent heart-searching sermon, and I recommend for you to go back and listen to it if you haven't absorbed it already.

But because verses 7 through 14 are completely dependent on verses 1 through 6, and because verses 15 and 16 of the chapter are a summary of all 14 verses, what I want to do right now is read the entire chapter again. So cast your eyes upon Genesis 16:

Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. She was rich, she was beautiful, she had wisdom; all of her peers looked at her in awe, but the one thing that you had to have as a woman to be truly blessed in this life, she didn't have. She had a female Egyptian servant, slave, whose name was Hagar. And Sarai said to Abram, "Behold now, Yahweh has prevented me from bearing children. So go into my servant; it may be that I shall obtain children by her. She'll—she could potentially have a child, especially a son, and I will take that son as my own." And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai, much like Adam listened to the voice of Eve. So after Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her—her slave, and gave her to Abram her husband as a wife. And he went into Hagar, and she conceived. And when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt to her mistress; she literally looked down her nose at Sarai. And Sarai said to Abram, "May the wrong done to me be on you! Like, this is your fault; you should have been a better leader. I gave my slave, 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." But Abram said to Sarai, "Behold, your slave is in your power; do to her as you please. Whatever you want to do to her, do to her; you're going to have no qualms with me." Then Sarai dealt harshly with Hagar; she treated her violently—verbally absolutely, physically possibly—but dealt harshly with her. That phrase means she humiliated her, made her feel small, ran her down. And so Hagar fled from Sarai. The angel of the Lord found Hagar by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur. And He said, "Hagar, servant of Sarai, where have you come from? Where are you going?" She said, "I'm fleeing from my mistress Sarai." The angel of the Lord said to her, "Return to your mistress and submit to her." The angel of the Lord also said to her, "I will surely multiply your offspring so that they cannot be numbered for multitude." 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, Yahweh, has listened to your affliction. 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, his brothers, his cousins, his relatives." So Hagar called the Name of Yahweh who spoke to her, "You are a God of seeing." For she said, "Truly, here I have seen Him who looks after me; I have seen Him who sees me." Therefore the well was called Beer-lahai-roi (the well of the living one who sees me); it lies between Kadesh and Bered. And Hagar bore Abram a son, and Abram called the name of his son whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram.

I have taken the text into three parts, verses 7 through 16, and the first part we'll call "Divine Intervention." Divine Intervention. We see it in verse 7: "The angel of the Lord found

her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur." And the first question that you're asking here as a person who's trying to study and grasp what is exactly going on is, where is she? Like, we know that she has fled, but—but where is she? And the best that I can tell is that she has made it at least 80 miles away from her home where Abram and Sarai are. And she is on her way southwest to back to Egypt. And she is trying her best to get back to the place that she knows.

So here she is: pregnant, a slave, destitute, no covering, no protection, no money, no standing, and she has made it miles and miles to try to run as far away from Sarai and Abram that she can get. And so that leads us to the question of, how is she? How is she doing? Well, this is not a very hard question to answer. She's not doing good. She's got no standing in this life, she's got no identity, she's got no value. As a matter of fact, in the Ancient Near East, with Sarai having her as her slave, Sarai could conceivably look at Hagar no different than she looked at as—as a table or a donkey or some other tool that could be used for the advancement of their family. She has no standing. Not only she has no standing, she has now decided to make the decision to run away. But she's not just merely running away; this—this is a criminal act. She is owned by Abram and Sarai. She doesn't have some autonomy; she doesn't have citizenship to go and do this. Not only is she owned by them, but the baby that she is carrying is technically their baby, not her own. And she is going away in a criminal act to say, "I don't know what is ahead of me and what is ahead of my baby; I might die in the desert, but it is better than living under them." She's not doing good.

And so here she is, and we're to understand that she is now about out, because she's been crying out. She's in despair. She's likely about to starve to death; it looks like she's about to thirst to death. We know that from the rest of the passage. But we also want us to ask in this—this heading "Divine Intervention"—who is this angel of the Lord? Now church, look down at the—at the entire passage again, because we see in verse 7 "the angel of the Lord," and then in verse 9 "the angel of the Lord," and then in verse 10 "the angel of the Lord," and then in verse 11 "the angel of the Lord." We're talking four times Moses writes down via the Holy Spirit the identity "the angel of the Lord." This is referenced 58 times in the Old Testament. And this is what we need to understand. We're inclined immediately just because of our 21st century American thought about angels, we're inclined to think that this is merely a messenger; this is one of the myriad of angels that God has sent to—to her. But this is what we need to understand: that every time that this phrase, this moniker, is used for "the angel of the Lord" in the Old Testament, He's also in the same passage described as Yahweh Himself.

Exodus chapter 3 when the angel of the Lord appears to Moses in the burning bush, ultimately identified as Yahweh. Up on the mountain top when Moses is getting the law and the angel of the Lord is identified, He's marked out as Yahweh. So there is a sense in which the essence of the triune God has come to face-to-face with this slave, this Egyptian woman who has no standing, no prominence, no identity in this world, and He shows Himself to her. And I would make an argument that this angel of the Lord is, in fact, a pre-

incarnate revelation and manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ. I'll tease that out a little bit later. But what we have is divine intervention because the angel of the Lord found her by a spring of water in the wilderness.

And then here is the—here is the bulk of our text here, verses 8 through 14: "The Staggering Interaction." The Staggering Interaction. First, we see the angel of the Lord's question: "Hagar, servant of Sarai..." Notice how He identifies her: you are a slave of Sarai; that is where you are in this world, in this life, this is your life; you are her servant. "...where have you come from and where are you going?" Now let's remind ourselves, this is the Lord Himself speaking. This is the One who is both omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent. It's not as if He doesn't know the answer to these questions. So His two questions are not a question of Hagar's geography; they are a question of Hagar's theology. What is she thinking about her situation? What is going in her heart about her circumstances? What are you doing right now, and what is motivating that decision, Hagar? That is the question.

And she gives an answer. She speaks to Him, and she gives an honest, terse response: "I am running away from my mistress Sarai." I'm fleeing, I'm done with it, it's over, I don't care what happens to me, but I'm not doing that anymore. And His command to her is shocking to me. It says, "The angel of the Lord said to her, 'Return to your mistress and submit to her.'" Submit to her. This word "return"—it is the word that we use for repentance. It is the exact word. For those of you who have studied repentance, you know that repentance is when you are walking one way, and God turns you around and says, "Turn your back on your sin, turn your face and your heart toward Me and walk after Me." And He says to her, "Return." Return. In a sense, "Repent." That's a bold declaration to make given the awfulness of her circumstances. But He says, "Return to your mistress," and here's another little nugget, church, and He says, "and submit to her." Submit to her.

The word "submit"—this was probably the most—this was probably the most kind of wrecking thing for me this week as I studied. It's the same root that Sarai did to her when she was inside the house. The ESV translates that Sarai "dealt harshly" with her, treated her harshly; that word means she "humiliated" her. Now the angel of the Lord turns that word on its head and He says, "I want you to return, and I want you to go back to Sarai and I want you to humiliate yourself. I want you to humble yourself before Sarai and I want you to serve in the manner that I've called you to serve."

Now Hagar doesn't respond this way, church, but I can imagine that she is thinking to herself, "That's easy for You to say. That's easy for You to say because You don't have to go and do it. You don't know what that humiliation is like. You don't know what that violence is like. You don't know what that harshness is like. You don't know what it's like to feel this small." Now she didn't say that, but she's possibly thinking it. But we also know that this is the same One who's making this call on her, who 2,000 years later did not regard equality with God something to be held on to, but emptied Himself and made Himself a slave all the way to the point of suffering and death, yes, even the death of a cross. So yeah, He—He does know what He's talking about, and He's not calling her to do anything that He's not

willing to do Himself. And brothers and sisters, He's not calling us to do anything more than what He has already done Himself.

"Return to your mistress and submit to her." His promise then comes. He follows it up—He follows that command, that hard command—and says, "The angel of the Lord said to her, 'I will surely multiply your offspring so that they cannot be numbered for multitude.'" That's what I'm going to do for you. We've already stated that Sarai had everything that there was to have: beauty, riches, clout, authority, servants, animals, houses; she's got it all, but she doesn't have the one thing that she needs to be blessed, which is a child. And so here, what God is promising to Hagar is that you are going to be blessed. You are going to have a child, and you are going to see that child have children, and those children have children, and those children have children, and there're going to be so many on this earth that no human could possibly number how many there are. Now that promise comes primarily because of God's already made covenant promise to Abram, but it comes to her nonetheless, and she is a benefactor of it.

And then the angel of the Lord said to her—here's His declaration. Now I want you to notice when we walk through this declaration, notice what He declares about—about the offspring that is going to come. First of all, He says, "Behold! Look! Watch out, 'cause you're really not going to believe what I'm about to tell you. Here we go. Number one: you're pregnant; I know it. And you shall bear a son. You shall bear a son." (A little bit of a trite comment here, but this was the first sonogram that was ever—uh—done in the history of the world, albeit a divine sonogram.) "You're going to bear a son and you shall call his name Ishmael." The name Ishmael means "the God who hears." For those of you who are in seminary, you'll see that ending 'El' is God, you'll also see in the middle the 'Shma'—you know what we call the great Shema? "Hear, O Israel! Hear, the Lord your God, the Lord is one." Ishmael: the God who hears. "You shall call his name Ishmael because the Lord, Yahweh, has listened to your affliction and has visited you. He shall be a wild donkey of a man," (here's his character) "he'll be a wild ass of a man."

When Jamie and I moved back from California, we—we were living at the—the farm down on Austin Road and one of the first nights that we were there, we're just sitting in the living room, chilling, probably 9:00 at night, and I hear this noise: "Hee-haw! Hee-haw! Hee-haw!" I fly out the door, look out and there is this donkey that is running down the street, legs kicking out, going 90 to nothing, and—and I'm just like, "Jamie, what is the world is this?" you know, and—and now that I look back on that moment I think, that—that—that's Ishmael. That's Ishmael. Like, he is a wild donkey of a man God says he's going to be, and his hand's going to be against everyone, he's going to be a nomad, he's going to go from here to there, down to here, up to there, and everywhere he goes he's going to wreak havoc. It doesn't matter whether they're relatives or not; he is just going to—he's got this heart set that I'm going to do it my way, I'm going to do it in my timing, and I don't care who gets in my way. And man, is the angel of the Lord not right about that 4,000 years later?

We see His question, His command, His promise, His declaration, but then we see her reverence. Her reverence. Look—look down at the passage again. He makes this promise and declaration, she absorbs it. It's almost like, man, she—she can't believe that this interaction is happening. She is—she's interacting with the God of heaven and earth. She's—she's being seen, and she's being talked to, she's being listened to by—by this amazing person. And so, so she called the Name of Yahweh who spoke to her, "You are a God of seeing." For she said, "Truly, here I have seen Him who looks after me; I have seen Him who sees me." This is a reverential response to her encounter with Almighty God. And church, we need to know a couple of things: we have this concept that in the Bible and the characters and the people in the Bible, they're constantly interacting with a manifestation of God and getting a personal interaction with them and miracles are happening all the time, and that's simply not true. It happens in a few times, in a few cases, with a few people, and this is one of those times. And this is a personal interaction that God is having with an Egyptian slave woman, and He's speaking with her, and she sees Him and she hears Him, and she has this amazing response. And I would just tell you this: nobody that we see in the Bible and nobody today has an encounter with the Almighty living God and walks away from that experience unchanged.

Hagar is the only person in the Bible who gives God a name. Now here's the thing: Moses, writing this stuff down in the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, could have written the account that Hagar had an experience with God and he turned her around and she went back to where she came from to fulfill God's plans. But that's not what he writes. He literally quotes Hagar's words and the angel's words and the interaction that this woman has with this God, as if to put his stamp on approval that the name she gave Him is an accurate name: that He is the God who sees, He is the God who hears, He is the God who listens, He is the God who pursues, He is the God who rescues, He is the God who redeems, He is the God who knows. In this world's eyes, Hagar could say, "I'm a nobody and I'm a nothing," but in the eyes of this God, I'm seen, I'm heard, I'm known, I'm loved. That is a staggering interaction.

And then, as a summary to the entire chapter, we have an "Intriguing Outcome." An intriguing outcome, albeit a preliminary outcome (I mean, this is in no way, shape, or form the end of the story; that story's still being told to be framed). But we'll read it again:

So Hagar bore Abram a son, and Abram called the name of his son whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram.

Now here's the thing, y'all. As I thought about how it would be that Abram would name the son that Hagar bore Ishmael, we really have two basic options:

1. One is that God Himself impressed upon Abram with no communication between Abram and Hagar what the name would be because again, she doesn't have legal standing, she's not really his love, beloved wife, that he would name his—this son Ishmael.

2. Or she comes back and she tells Abram her interaction with—with God in the desert and that his name is to—and that the baby's name is to be Ishmael.

But here's the thing: no matter which one of those are, God is at work because Abram names the child the very thing that the God—that God said the child's name should be. And it is an amazing thing; it's a confirmation to Hagar that God is at work and He is going to fulfill His promises.

The other observation I want us to make about this summation of the chapter in verses 15 and 16—church, who got this ball rolling? (This whole thing that unfolded.) Sarah. This was her plan. As Corey preached last week, she sought to try to control her circumstances in order to achieve God's promises. And she says, "You know what? Maybe—maybe she will bear a child that can be my own and—and therefore we can fulfill God's promises." And the Holy Spirit through the writing of Moses makes sure to tell us that Sarai is nowhere in this picture right here. Hagar bore Abram a son. Hagar bore the son to Abram. Abram was 86 years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram. No word about Sarah. And the truth is, I would love to put a bow like on all the great movies and say, "And then they learned how to work it out." They did not learn how to work it out. There was conflict and strife and problems, and I'm not going to steal the show for chapter 21 and the rest of those, but the reality is that in a broken world, a world tainted by sin and problems and violators and victims and everything else, we just have to live life sometimes under the shadow of the brokenness that we create, and God doesn't undo everything that we do.

When I was deciding on whether or not to—to believe and then to preach whether or not the angel of the Lord was a pre-incarnate manifestation of our Lord Jesus, I wrestled with it all week. But then when I started thinking in terms of divine intervention and a staggering conversation and an intriguing outcome, and then when I wrestled with the fact that the angel of the Lord had a message for Hagar, a word for Hagar—and then when I realized John chapter 1 says that in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory full of grace and truth. And then three chapters after that, that very Word shows up in the wilderness of Samaria and interacts with a woman who is also troubled in her life; and by that well of water He offers her life that springs up to eternal and gives her hope that she can't see in her own life, offers her promises that she can experience as a mere Samaritan who's had five husbands and the man that she is with now is not even her husband; that He interacts with her and offers her the bread and the water that is eternal and says, "You can believe too," and she runs off and brings others and they believe, and she's redeemed and they're redeemed, and she receives promises and they receive promises and they get redemption and she gets redemption—I think to myself, that's the very same person.

We have a Savior, a messenger, the very Word who comes to us in our trouble, in our violations, in our victimhood and says, "I have come and I make a promise to you: Return.

Turn around. Turn your back on your sin, turn your back on your past, and turn your heart toward Me, and I will have a life of promise and blessing for you."

This is how I will land the plane. I'll save the big idea till right now. So if you're just like, "Well, what was that even about?" this is what it's about. Can y'all listen? Just listen. Life is full of despair and distress. It's full of victimhood and violation. And as God's children, we have two options when we experience heartache:

1. We can choose impatience, control, insolence, anger, harshness; that is, listen, we can choose to walk by sight and not by faith.
2. Or we can choose to trust in God's word. We can choose to wait on God's timing. And we can choose to hope in God's promises, knowing that He is a God who sees, He is a God who hears, He is a God who pursues, He is a God who knows, He is a God who loves.

That is who your God is, and He's worthy to trust and wait and hope in. Amen?

Father, in the Name of Jesus Christ our Lord, we pray that You would help us not to control, not to manipulate, not to finagle, not to—to be insolent or harsh, but instead to take on our identity as victors in Christ and to trust and to wait and to hope. And we pray this in the powerful Name of our Savior. Amen.