

# PATH TO PURPOSE

GOD'S EPIC PLAN FOR YOUR LIFE

## Getting Ahead of God

Text: Genesis 16:1-16

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1. When was a season in your life that God felt far from you? Are you in such a season now? Describe what that was/is like?
2. Read Genesis 16:1-6. At this point it has been 10 years since God's original promise to Abram, but God has just reiterated his promise to Abram in dramatic fashion in Genesis 15
  - a. We have seen so far in this series that Abram is far from being perfect. But God is gracious and faithful, and God never changes his mind about using Abram and his family to bless the world, despite Abram's imperfect faith. In what ways does this chapter continue to display Abram's and Sarai's propensity at this point in their faith journeys to take things into their own hands?
  - b. Ken taught us that in terms of their contemporary culture, there was nothing wrong with what Abram and Sarai did. This was an acceptable way in that culture to ensure that one's family line continued. However, what is it that made their actions contrary to God's plan for their lives?
  - c. How do we, now, in our contemporary culture, determine the things that may be culturally accepted but not according to God's design and desire for our lives?
  - d. Ken taught that because things weren't going the way that Sarai wanted, she fell into the trap of listening to other voices: the voices of culture at large which taught some things which were contrary to God's will, as we have already seen, and the voice of the enemy pulling the same tricks he had been pulling since Genesis 3, namely that things weren't going the way she wanted because God didn't love her. How have you struggled with these same thoughts, and did it ever lead you into decisions that in hindsight you see were unwise or even sinful?
3. Read Genesis 16:7-16. Hagar has been mistreated, used, abused, but God has not forgotten about nor abandoned her.
  - a. How did God show up to Hagar in her moment of distress?

- b. What were the instructions given to Hagar by the angel of the Lord?
  - c. What about the angel of the Lord's instructions to Hagar seem crazy by human standards? Yet, how does Hagar respond?
  - d. What do you suppose was God's purpose in having Hagar, and not Abram or Sarai, be the model of faith in this particular part of the story?
4. God shows us that he truly is the God who sees us in our plight and never gives up on us no matter how broken we are. Most dramatically when the eternal Son of God came down and became a man, Jesus. The person and work of Jesus show us just how far God will go to bless his undeserving people. Read Matthew 9:35-36.
- a. What was Jesus' motivation in his ministry, and how does that relate to the idea that Hagar recognized God as the "God of seeing" and the God "who looks after me"?
  - b. What does it mean to be "harassed as helpless, like sheep without a shepherd"?
  - c. What did that lead Jesus to do? What was the content of his ministry?

Challenge: Read Matthew 9:37-38. Right after Jesus saw the helpless crowd, he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore, pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest." Who do you know who is harassed and helpless right now? Who do you know who is hurting and may feel like God is far away from them? Who needs to hear the message of this God who sees and comes to us in our plight? How can you be a mini angel (which means "messenger") of the Lord and bring this message of hope to that person?

**Prayer:**

Jesus, please show me your people. Open my eyes to see everyone as Your Creation. I pray for wisdom and guidance as you lead me into the fields. Send those to work beside me and to go before me. Thank you for the gift of work for the growth of Your Kingdom.

## STUDY DEEPER

### Following Jesus Doesn't Work

I met a middle-aged woman one day who told me she had given up on Christianity. "It just didn't work for me," she said. My response was: "What on earth made you think Jesus was supposed to work *for you*? The truth is that you were supposed to work *for him*."

The sentiment is widespread. It seems that many assume Jesus is supposed to be our personal magical genie who grants our wishes, at least some of the time. Such a magical view of faith is catastrophic, for people abandon what they thought was the Christian faith when it doesn't work. And worse, people think they're embracing the Christian faith when it does.

Nothing in the Bible suggests obeying God is supposed to "work for us." According to the biblical pattern, more often than not following God made things worse for people, not better.

Consider, for example, Mary, the mother of Jesus. She was just a young teenager when the angel Gabriel appeared to her saying:

*Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you....you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end (Luke 1:28-33).*

To miraculously conceive, give birth to, and raise the Christ-child – what an honor! Mary undoubtedly felt highly "favored." Thirty years later, however, Mary didn't feel so "favored." She actually thought her son had gone stark mad. He was making outlandish if not blasphemous claims. He was arrogantly confronting religious authorities. He was hanging out with social rejects and inviting trouble makers (zealots) into his inner circle. He was gaining a reputation for being insane if not demon possessed – to say nothing of being a glutton and a drunkard. And, consequently, several attempts had already been made on his life. So she and her other children went out to "restrain him" (Mark 3:21). It didn't work.

Not long after this, the thing Mary feared happened. Jesus was murdered. The angel long ago hadn't said anything about this. Mary had to watch her son, the one she was supposedly "favored" to bear, die an

excruciating, humiliating death by crucifixion. What happened to the promise that Jesus was going to be “great,” “the Son of the Most High,” an heir of the “throne of his ancestor David”?

Imagine her heartbreak and confusion. We sometimes soften this by jumping ahead to Jesus’ resurrection. But we need to appreciate that neither Mary nor any of the disciples at this point understood Jesus’ talk of a resurrection. It was so contrary to their ordinary way of thinking that it simply didn’t register. This horrific moment was the end as far as Mary was concerned. This horror was her great reward for submitting to God.

Something similar is true for most of God’s heroes. John the Baptist spent the last year of his life in a lonely prison. He knew that the messiah foretold in the Old Testament was supposed to “proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners” ([Is 61:1](#)). And so he sent messengers to Jesus asking him, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” ([Matt 11:2](#)). In his desperate situation, John was doubting. Was Jesus really the messiah, and was his entire life, spent in a harsh desert preparing the way for Jesus as the Messiah, a wasted life?

Jesus responded by referring back to the Isaiah prophecy, telling John’s messengers to report what they saw. “[T]he blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them” ([Matt 11:3-5](#)). But Jesus left out the part about the release of prisoners! No wonder Jesus immediately added, “blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.” ([Matt. 11:6.](#))

Jesus was in effect saying, “Yes, John, I am the hoped for Messiah. I’m doing all the things the Messiah is supposed to do – except the one thing you need him to do.” No explanation; just a denial.

John would soon be decapitated as a sort of party joke for Herod’s vicious wife. John had forsaken everything to do the Lord’s work and this is what he got for it. The Messiah inexplicably leaves him to rot and suffer an ignoble death in prison.

Moses suffered an equally cruel fate. For 40 years he battled frustration working with a whiney people walking through a mostly barren wilderness. He never wanted the job and in fact tried hard to get out of it, yet here he was. The one thing that kept him going was the promise of a land flowing with milk and honey. And then, just as they are about to enter into the promised land, the Lord tells Moses,

*...ascend this mountain of the Abraham ... and view the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the Israelites for a possession; and you shall die there on the mountain... Although you may view the land from a distance, you shall not enter it – the land that I am giving to the Israelites.” (Deut 32:49, 52).*

This isn't the "happy ever after" ending we want or expect for our heroes today. It frankly seems a bit cruel. Moses gets to look at the land he's not allowed to enter – all because of a mistake he made decades earlier. His grand prize for sacrificing everything in obedience to Yahweh is a longing gaze from a distance and then death.

And so, it is, in one form or another, for most of the heroes of the Bible. Yes, there were blessings and even occasional miracles sprinkled throughout some of the heroes' lives. But more often than not their obedience resulted in pain, sadness and disappointment. Most "died in faith without having received the promises" (Heb 11:13). Some were "tortured.... suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment." Others were "stoned to death," "sawn in two," "killed by the sword" and "went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented"(Heb 11: 35-38). The moral of the story seems to be that if you're looking to make your life better, here and now, *don't listen to God!*

Such is the biblical pattern, and it's certainly exemplified in the life and death of Jesus. In anguish he asks the Father if it's possible to accomplish their objective another way, but there is not. His obedience to the Father leads him to be scourged, mocked and crucified. And Jesus tells us that, if this is what happens to the master, the servants must expect the same. If its benefits in the here and now you're looking for, do not follow Jesus. Indeed, if its benefits your looking for, you cannot follow Jesus.

To follow Jesus and enter into Kingdom life, we must be willing to go through what Jesus went through as well as what Mary, John, Moses and many other heroes of the faith went through. If we do not actually have to endure suffering, that is simply good fortune, not because we are specially "blessed." To follow Jesus authentically is to die to everything the flesh-self holds dear, whether we actually loose them or not. We must die to the quest to avoid of pain and inconvenience; die to the quest for pleasure, power and fame; die to the security of our homes, family, friends and nation; and even die to the certainty of our opinions. Every attempt to gain a personal sense of worth, significance and security by what we do, what we accomplish, what we acquire and who we impress must die.

Jesus commands this much, not because he is mean, but because he is more profoundly in love with us than we could possibly ever imagine. And he knows that it is this false, self-centered way of living that is keeping us from true life. When we have truly died, we discover this. To be free from the self that is addicted to the question: What's in it for me? is to be truly ALIVE and free. It is to enter into the kingdom of God.

But, as Jesus always taught, you can only find this life if you completely lose your life.

If you're focusing on this life, here and now, following Jesus doesn't "work" and we should stop telling people that it does. But if we'll die to the attempt to make things "work" for us, we'll discover a deeper LIFE that no longer cares about what does and doesn't work for us. We'll discover the LIFE of the Kingdom.

<https://reknew.org/2008/12/following-jesus-doesnt-work/>