

Foundations: Stop Helping!
By Jason Huff
September 12, 2021
Psalm 6; Matthew 4:1-11; Genesis 16

Our final Scripture reading today comes from Genesis 16. May God bless the reading of His holy, sacred, and fully inspired Word. “Now Sarai, Abram’s wife, had borne him no children. But she had an Egyptian slave named Hagar; so she said to Abram, “The Lord has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my slave; perhaps I can build a family through her.” Abram agreed to what Sarai said. So after Abram had been living in Canaan ten years, Sarai his wife took her Egyptian slave Hagar and gave her to her husband to be his wife. He slept with Hagar, and she conceived. When she knew she was pregnant, she began to despise her mistress. 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.” “Your slave is in your hands,” Abram said. “Do with her whatever you think best.” Then Sarai mistreated Hagar; so she fled from her. The angel of the Lord found Hagar near a spring in the desert; it was the spring that is beside the road to Shur. And he said, “Hagar, slave of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going?” “I’m running away from my mistress Sarai,” she answered. Then the angel of the Lord told her, “Go back to your mistress and submit to her.” The angel added, “I will increase your descendants so much that they will be too numerous to count.” The angel of the Lord also said to her: “You are now pregnant and you will give birth to a son. You shall name him Ishmael, for the Lord has heard of your misery. He will be a wild donkey of a man; his hand will be against everyone and everyone’s hand against him, and he will live in hostility toward all his brothers.” She gave this name to the Lord who spoke to her: “You are the God who sees me,” for she said, “I have now seen the One who sees me.” That is why the well was called Beer Lahai Roi; it is still there, between Kadesh and Bered. So Hagar bore Abram a son, and Abram gave the name Ishmael to the son she had borne. Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore him Ishmael.”

When I was young, I wanted to help my dad in the kitchen. He was a caterer; he spent a whole lot of his time in the kitchen. He was always working on perfecting a recipe, trying to get dinner ready in the limited time he had away from work – if he wasn’t asleep on the couch or on the job getting a party ready for a few hundred people, the kitchen is where he’d be. As a kid, I figured that was where I should be too.

But I learned pretty quickly that a caterer’s kitchen is kind of a sacred place. You don’t mess around in a caterer’s kitchen. And inevitably, I would eventually get chased out because I had my own ideas about how to do things. Why did it matter if I cut the vegetables this way? What did it matter if I added the sauce first or the water first? I was more interested in making it fun, and I was impatient. But my dad would say, “There’s one way to do this, it’s the right way, and it’s my way.” It was harsh, and it wasn’t always true. I got frustrated by my dad’s hard-headedness. And yet, wherever he worked, the catering side of the business did extremely well. My dad has been gone 26 years and people still talk about his food, the parties he did, and even the way he treated even the most minor employee with respect. He knew how to cook and knew how to cater a party. And so as an adult, I can see why sometimes he ushered me out when I wasn’t interested in doing things his way...for things to wind up right, I needed to stop helping.

Today's passage is along the same lines. We have a great number of ideas about the way the universe should work, and we often tell God so. This is not a new thing; faithful people throughout the centuries have done it. Look at the laments in Job, in Ecclesiastes, the Psalms, Lamentations. God's people have never been afraid to tell Him their woes and to ask why things are the way they are. Yet there's a huge difference between asking God about what He's up to and deciding that we're going to help His plans along our own way.

So let's see what's really going on here and why this terrible plan was set in motion. Last week's passage reminded us that God makes covenants with His people, and He cut a covenant with Abram promising him that he would not have to leave his estate to his servant Eleazar, but that he would have his own heir. God promised that from this heir would come a people greater than the stars in the sky, and God makes it explicit that they would be Abram's physical lineage.

But the problem still remains – no heir. And we've reached a point that common sense would tell us something has to give. Abram is 85 and Sarai is 75. In the last two years, we've had a couple of friends in their mid-40s become pregnant unexpectedly. They thought they were done having children and surprise! But realistically, having a child in your early 50s would make the news even today; in a world of all sorts of scientific measures, it just doesn't happen. Sarai not only is 75, she's had no children. Her expectations have been set for her. So while we may be horrified at the details of her plan, while we might hate the choices that were made, we still have sympathy for her. This promise of God feels like a trap to her.

And so Sarai comes up with a very expedient plan – Abram will have her maidservant marry Hagar as a secondary wife. Hagar was likely given to Sarai as a maid when the Egyptians gave Abram and Sarai all sorts of gifts during their sojourn there. Sarai would remain Abram's wife of importance; Hagar's child would in essence belong to Sarai and Abram. Hagar would not be Abram's mistress; she was only brought in for the purpose of fulfilling God's promise. Sarai no doubt sins in her creation of this plan; Abram no doubt sins in putting the plan into practice. It seems unseemly to us, and it is; yet by making Hagar Abram's second wife, it seems that Abram and Sarai are doing things "on the up and up" according to the ways of their time, when having multiple concubines, and mistresses was common for a man of Abram's wealth and status.

What Abram and Sarai doesn't count on is the heartache and jealousy and ill will the whole affair will bring. Hagar becomes pregnant, which put an incredible emotional burden on Sarai. All these years, Sarai was barren; it wasn't Abram's fault they didn't have children. In a world where child-bearing and rearing was considered a chief responsibility of a wife, Hagar pointed out how far Sarai fell short. And that's what's implied in the Hebrew language. When it says that Hagar despised her mistress, the wording in a literal sense means that Sarai became small in her eyes. She thinks less of Sarai; she looks down on her, in all likelihood because she couldn't fulfill her role. Sarai becomes jealous and then blames the whole thing on Abram. And Abram, trying to keep the peace, says, "You do what seems best." And so Sarai mistreats her – the wording here is the same wording God uses to describe how the Egyptians would treat the Israelite slaves. It's awful. Hagar does the only thing she can think of when she's treated so badly – she makes a run for it.

If I were to summarize what's going on into a paradigm that makes sense for us today, it's this: *God's improbable plans are far better for us than our own practical plans.* Yes, God's plan for Abram and Sarai was improbable. It was impossible by human standards. And yet, God doesn't need our practical plans to make His will come about. God doesn't need us "helping." God desires our faith and our obedience, not our quick-fix solutions. When we try to solve God's problems for Him, we get into a mess of hurt.

Think about this: the Islamic peoples of today state that Ishmael is their father. It's pretty much impossible to trace that lineage back, and Mohammed wasn't born until 570 AD. Yet the belief held throughout Islamic lands is that the Jewish people came from Isaac and the Arabic peoples came from Ishmael. Whether it is literally true or not, this heritage has incredibly far-reaching implications. It means that Sarai's helpful plan set into motion a conflict that still, in the present day, embroils a huge cross-section of the world. Sarai's attempt to help God would put her own people into danger millennia later.

God's impractical plans have benefitted the world greatly. I know so many missionaries whose own families have tried to dissuade them from going, to do something practical rather than throwing their lives away on people far away from home. But those same missionaries who gave their lives in the service of others? They started churches and ministries in places where the gospel is still strong! The church in Europe is on life support, but the church in Asia, in South America, in Africa where those most dedicated to God's impractical plans went, it's thriving!

This isn't to say that we shouldn't be practical people. God put us in this world, and while we live in this world, there are some things we do that are simply necessary and wise for day to day life. We pay our bills. We go to work. We save some money for a rainy day. We mind our budget. We don't spend money we can't pay back. In many ways, practicality is godly wisdom we need to put to use.

Where we get into trouble is when our plans are short-sighted and fail to take into account God's abilities and God's long-term plans. Sarai's plan was convenient but obviously short-sighted. We look at what happened and think, "What did she expect?" But to Abram and Sarai, it seemed the right thing to do at the time. They were helping God's plan to come to fruition, or so they thought. But it wasn't on them to make God's plan happen, and so they create chaos for all the generations to come, not to mention the chaos in their own household.

I think about how many people with good intentions wind up hurting others in their attempts to help God and be charitable. There was a time back thirty years ago or so where there was a major effort to get wells built in Africa. Good idea, bad plan. The wells required parts from the first world in order to work. Those parts broke, the well broke, and the villages were left with nothing. It was a short-sighted plan that assumed that the charities who built the wells would always be able to keep them up – but when those charities failed, the wells failed. Now, most mission organizations doing that kind of work build wells with parts serviceable in the countries where they are digging, with maintenance taught to those who use the wells. It required foresight, but it made sense, and now those wells are likely to keep going.

That's all big-picture views. Let's bring it back to us. Where might we be trying to find a shortcut around God's long term plans? How might we work alongside God with His plans faithfully rather than trying to create solutions God doesn't desire for us? Let me give just a few examples I can think of that I've seen in my life and the lives of friends around me.

We can think that God's plan is for us to go to college and have a good career, but our grades aren't the best. We can be tempted to cheat, to help God's plan along. We might not get caught. But we won't actually be earning those grades, which will catch up to us in the long run, and that pattern of lying might easily become a habit. Perhaps God has a different, better plan for you than a particular path that someone decided should be the norm.

It could be that you want a relationship, that you'd like to fall in love, have a family. Sounds really nice. But it's easy to be in a wrong relationship just to be in a relationship, to fall in love with the idea of being in love rather than actually finding a committed person to share your life with who shares your faith and values. God's plan might be very different than what we expect, but we can't expect the world's ideas of romantic relationships to dictate what we as believers do.

At retirement, it's easy to think that the plan should be moving where it's warm and sunny, or to a favorite destination spot. There's nothing inherently wrong with that. But if you have children or grandchildren that really need your help, if your community needs you, if your church needs you, perhaps that practical plan needs to give way to God's greater plan for you to show His love to others in your retirement years. I admit that the Smoky Mountains look like an awfully nice place to retire to me...and yet I know that ultimately it's God's plan, not my plan, that should matter.

So let's look at the final section of this chapter, because what it tells us is important too. Hagar runs away. She is not guiltless in this whole situation, but she *has* been wronged; she's been treated harshly, and as a servant had the least say of anyone in this mess. She goes out into the desert, and the spot where the angel of the LORD finds her tells us that she's probably attempting to go back to Egypt. The problem is, she's put herself and her baby in immense danger. She's in a barren wilderness by herself, well over 150 miles from the borders of her home country. Everything about this scenario just screams at us. It's bad news.

The angel states very clearly that he knows who she is. He asks a question of her – where have you come from and where are you going? The implication is, where do you have to turn? How do you expect to get through this? She admits the truth – she's running away from Sarai. But the significance is clear...at this time, in this era, there was no sympathy or understanding for a runaway servant. Her life, the life of her child, and their livelihood are at stake.

The angel tells her, "Go back to Sarai and submit to her." The language for "submit" here is pointing both at Hagar's sin and Sarai's sin, because it can mean "humble yourself," which is the opposite of what Hagar had done, but it can also mean, "be afflicted," which is how Sarai treated her. It's a tough mandate. Is God telling Hagar to return to a life of abuse? Is there some universal application here? There isn't, and here's why.

Through the angel, God promises Hagar that her descendants will be too numerous to account. Remember that God made that kind of promise only to Abram. God makes the same promise now to a maidservant, someone of no renown who would not expect God to ever make her promises. The promise is not about Abram's descendants but hers. It's a personal promise.

There's also a personal promise embedded in the foretelling of Ishmael's nature. Hagar is a slave, bound to Sarai, who regardless of what the angel had told her had little choice but to return. But Ishmael will be slave to no one. Yes, there will be hostility – and yes, that hostility will last between the children of Ishmael and Isaac on down the line. But Ishmael will not submit to a yoke of slavery. He will be free to make his own way, and the freedom she does not enjoy, her son will – and his people after him.

What's perhaps most telling her and what makes Hagar a sympathetic person is that she doesn't argue with the angel about her situation. Going back to Abram's camp, she knows that she will always live in Sarai's shadow and probably Sarai's hostility. She is no longer so worried about that. Why not? Because God sees her. In fact, that's the name she gives God - "The God who sees me." And through the angel, she knows this truth personally. She even names the well after God because of this event. Yes, life may be hard – and it is; it gets worse later. But God has seen her. God knows her. And God has made promises to her.

It also says something to us about the Scripture God gave us that God did not clean it up. There's really very little reason this story has to be told. It makes Abram and Sarai look awful. This is the mother and father of the Hebrew nation? Yikes! This is the kind of thing that wouldn't have been repeated in the oral history from Abram to Moses; it's too embarrassing. And yet God made sure the story of Hagar was told.

I believe it's because its key element is something we desperately need to know: *God sees us*. Hagar had no standing, no station, a servant girl in a bad situation. In the world's eyes, she was nothing. God sees her. God delivers her and protects her and her son. Her life was difficult and, by God's own word, miserable. But she got through because God saw her.

God sees you too. Things are tough? God sees you. You wonder where the money for the next bill is coming from? God sees you. Mourning heavy losses and feeling discouraged? God sees you. Tired of your sins that keeping coming back up to haunt you and claw at you? God sees you. Feel like you don't matter? God sees you. Weight of the world on your shoulders? God sees you. Feel alone and afraid? God sees you.

Moreover, not only does God see you, God has made promises to you through His Son Jesus Christ. God promised Hagar a people too numerous to count through her son Ishmael. But God had promised all of us who have faith in Jesus eternal life, an eternal home with Him, free of mourning and pain, free from abuse and disgrace, free from the terrors of this world. Turn to Him, trust in Him, and those promises are yours.

Next week, we'll continue the story and God's new covenant with Abram. For now, let's remember – God doesn't need our help, just our faith and obedience. Follow in the footsteps of His son Jesus, and you will know, through all of life's troubles, God sees you.