

Great or Small, Right or Wrong, God Still Sees and God Still Cares.

Genesis 16:1-15

Gratefully adopted and adapted from "Learning To Wait On God" by David Owens @ SermonCentral.com

How many of you like waiting for things?

How many of you remember the classic 1979 television commercials that showed people waiting for thick, rich Heinz Ketchup to ooze out of the bottle in slow motion while the Carly Simon sang in the background, "anticipation, you're making me wait".

An article in Time.com once noted that ketchup flows out of a glass bottle at a rate of .028 miles per hour. I broke that down to the more graspable distance of ½ an inch a second – That is really slow, isn't it! Of course the catsup speed problem was solved with the advent of the squirt bottle which also transformed this bright red condiment into a handy food weapon. But nothing lasts forever and with plastic now determined bad for the environment we may have to return to glass and to once again impatiently waiting for a perfectly sauced hamburger.

None of us like to wait, do we? We don't like to wait for ketchup. We don't like to wait at the checkout line or the red light and we don't like to wait on God. That's when some people take matters into their own hands and try to hurry God along, which usually only makes things worse; at least that's what happened to Abraham and Sarah.

Back at the age of 75, God had promised Abraham and Sarah that a nation of descendants would come from his own DNA; his own flesh and blood. So they waited patiently for their first child...and they waited...and waited... For ten long years, they waited with no child.

Then they decided to help God out. Let's pick up their story in Genesis 16.

Now Sarai, Abram's wife, bore him no children. She had an Egyptian slave-girl whose name was Hagar, and Sarai said to Abram, 'You see that the Lord has prevented me from bearing children; go in to my slave-girl; it may be that I shall obtain children by her.' ... So Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her slave-girl, and gave her to her husband Abram as a wife (Gen. 16:1-3)

Notice how verse 1 states that Sarai, Abram's wife bore him no children. Fairly or unfairly, can you sense who was feeling the greatest pressure...who was feeling like it was her fault that no child had come into their home?

Since God's specific promise was that an heir would come from Abraham's own body, and nothing so far had been said about Sarah, she came up with the proposal, that Abraham take Hagar as a second wife.

Practices of bigamy and surrogacy are once again challenging our 21st century ideas of what makes a proper family and certainly our Christian sense of morality. Yet, in the Middle Eastern culture of 4000 years ago, this solution to Sarah's barrenness was quite acceptable. It was even included in some ancient prenuptial agreements that the husband of a childless wife could take her servant as a second wife and any child born of that second union to be regarded as the first wife's child.

So, while what Sarah had proposed was legal, even considered praiseworthy by cultural standards, was it the right thing to do and should they have known better?

I think they should have; both according to their own instincts – since they had not already tried this in their previous 60 years of marriage – and according to Biblical principles, and as proved by the next 15 years of family discord that resulted from their decision.

Why should they have known better? As indicated by the very first commandment given in our Bible, which was later enforced both by Mosaic law and the teachings of Jesus, this need for a one husband, one wife relationship apparently is built into our psyche. Any other variation seems destined to cause problems as proved by the multiple cautionary tales included in our Bible from Abraham, to Jacob, to David, to Solomon, of men who in taking multiple wives ended up compromising their family peace and in some instances even their relationship with God.

(Genesis 1:24, Exodus 20:14, Matthew 5:32).

Today, having the benefit of knowing how things unfolded, it's easy to see what Abraham and Sarah should have done. Their biggest problem was that apparently neither Abraham nor Sarah sought the Lord's input. Over and over again in Scripture when the persons involved inquired of the Lord and waited for God's reply, things went much better for them.

How much better things would have been had Abraham gone out under the stars and said, "Lord, Sarah and I are getting older with each passing year, and it is getting harder to wait for the promised child. So we have come up with a possible solution and are wondering what you think about this plan..." Unfortunately, Abraham didn't inquire

of the Lord before he and Sarah proceeded with their own plan. Let's see what happened...

Abraham went in to Hagar, and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress. Then Sarai said to Abram, 'May the wrong done to me be on you! I gave my slave-girl 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!' Abram said to Sarai, 'Your slave-girl is in your power; do to her as you please.' Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, until Hagar ran away. (15:4-6).

Abraham and Sarah's decision to take God's promise into their own hands didn't take long to unravel. The plan for Hagar to become a second wife backfired; rather than bringing joy to the household, it caused everyone to start turning against each other.

No matter how well intentioned, the consequences of sin almost always causes relationships to suffer and it can get ugly fast! In this case generosity, humility and forgiveness quickly exited the entire household to be replaced by jealousy, cowardice and cruelty.

- Hagar despised Sarah,
- Sarah blamed Abraham.
- Abraham then relinquished his leadership in the matter allowing Sarah to abuse Hagar until she ran away.

When Hagar realized she was pregnant, it wasn't just her belly that swelled, her ego did as well. Who could blame her? All Hagar had ever been was a slave, a piece of property to be used by others. When she was first gifted by Pharaoh to Sarah as part of the bride price, Hagar had expected to live an easy life in the palace serving as a genteel handmaid to a noble lady. Instead, she ended up being carried away from her home, to live in a shepherd's tent out in the wilderness, spending her days cooking for an increasingly old man and woman.

Now being offered as a wife to Abraham, according to current custom Hagar should no longer have been treated like a slave; so she couldn't help but thinking that both her status and future prospects were greatly improved; as the mother of Abraham's future heir... with time and patience all this would belong to her son and for her, life might finally be easy.

We are not told of Hagar's specific actions or words, but she must have been doing that which clearly indicated her new found aspirations along with her contempt for Sarah.

Sarah, now experiencing disrespect from her former slave, while also observing Abraham's apparent pleasure with his pregnant second wife, rather than owning up to her own mistake, she then blamed everything on her husband. Declaring that this was Abraham's fault, Sarah - too late – called for the Lord to enter into judgment between the two of them. But what could God now do to relieve the problem which these two had brought upon themselves.

In response, rather than protecting his second wife as he should have, Abraham caved in to Sarah's anger sending Hagar back into a life slavery under her now very jealous mistress who then mistreated her until she ran away.

When the Angel of the Lord found Hagar, she had already been gone for a week or more, having walked some 50 miles down a wilderness road – headed back to Egypt. Apparently no one had even noticed when Hagar went missing, or if they had noticed, they didn't care.

In many ways, Hagar was the innocent victim of Abraham and Sarah's lack of faith and now their cruelty. She hadn't asked for any of this – Hagar the slave was simply doing her servant work around the house one minute and the next thing she knew she was wearing a wedding dress and being led away to the marriage tent by an 86 year-old groom.

How sad that this supposed God honoring family was apparently unconcerned about the life and safety of this young, pregnant woman and the desperation they had driven her to, now walking alone through the wilderness with its predators and harsh conditions.

While Abraham and Sarah didn't seem to care about Hagar, God certainly did, **and that is perhaps the most important lesson we need to learn from this story. Whether great or small, whether right or wrong, God still sees us and cares for us. Even God's heroes must answer for their misdeeds and there is no one too small, too insignificant to be beneath God's care and concern.** The last portion of this chapter, shows how, all along God had also been watching out for this young pregnant slave and her future son and He sent His own personal messenger down to assure her of this.

Apparently Hagar realized that she wasn't speaking to just any stranger when the Angel of the Lord challenged her: "*Hagar, servant of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going?*" She replied honestly, "I'm running away from my mistress

Sarai," (vs. 8). Then with God's assurance that her own offspring now shared in His covenant promises to Abraham - that one day Ishmael's heirs would also be an equally countless multitude – the angel of the Lord sent her back to submit to Sarah.

While we might wonder at the wisdom of this arrangement, apparently it was the safest and best circumstance for Hagar to continue living in Abraham's tents until such time when God would reveal His next plans for her and her son's life. Abraham must have "manned" up enough to somewhat shield her and Ishmael from Sarah's wrath because Abraham obviously loved and cared for Ishmael; at one point even asking God to make this child his rightful heir (Genesis 17:18).

But Hagar must certainly have wondered at the rest of the prophecy concerning her future son.

The angel of the Lord said to her, 'you shall bear a son and you shall call him Ishmael, for the Lord has given heed to your affliction. He shall be a wild ass of a man, with his hand against everyone, and everyone's hand against him; and he shall live at odds with all his kin.' (vs.9-12)

Ishmael, the name Hagar was instructed to give to her son meant, "God hears," because the Lord had heard her cry of distress. This name would also be her constant reminder that the God of Abraham was also watching after her and her son. In awe of her experience she named the well where the angel had met her, "God who sees me." So, Hagar returned to the tents of her former husband and mistress where Ishmael was born.

As promised her son was a troublesome thorn in Abraham and Sarah's side for the next 15 years of his young life and thereafter for all of Abraham's future heirs up until this present day. As Christian speaker Randy Harris remarked, "When God first heard Sarah's idea, I'm guessing he shook his head and said, 'Well, there goes peace in the Middle East for the next 5000 years!'

Interestingly The Koran, the holy book of the Muslim faith, maintains that it was Ishmael who should have received Abraham's blessing only to have it stolen by Isaac; which according to custom was the way it should have been. But as He has often proved in other Biblical stories, God does not seem at all bound to follow custom, especially when He can more clearly see what is in one's heart.

Abraham was 87 years old when Ishmael was born. He and Sarah will now have to wait another 13 years before God fulfills His promise of birthing a full heir to the both of

them. We know nothing of these intervening years but they probably continued to be difficult ones for Hagar and Ishmael, because soon after Isaac is born, Sarah will demand "that this slave woman and her [now 15 year old] son" be cast out of their tent. This time God counseled Abraham to comply with Sarah's demands promising that Ishmael as an offspring of Abraham would also grow into a nation (Genesis 21:8-14)

Once again the Angel of the Lord then rescued Hagar and Ishmael from a desperate situation, settling them in the wilderness where Ishmael grew into manhood to fulfill the troublesome prophecy made about him.

There is at least this redemptive end to the story of Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, and Ishmael. According to scripture, when Abraham finally died at the age of 175 years, both of his sons Isaac and Ishmael together buried him in the cave beside his beloved wife Sarah. (Gen. 25:9)

So what lessons can we learn about our relationship with God from this story of Abraham, Sarah and Hagar?

One lesson we learn from this episode in Abraham's life is to...

We must not proceed in any decision or direction until we have adequately laid it before the Lord and awaited God's input. The old saying, "It is easier to ask for forgiveness than permission" is not a good approach to following after God. **Hudson Taylor** once said, "**God's work, done in God's way, will never lack God's supply.**"

One of the fundamental problems with Abraham and Sarah's plan was that it grew from a mindset which said: "God has shown me the goal but it's up to me to figure out how to reach that goal. God isn't getting the job done, so he needs me to do it."

God had a plan for fulfilling His promise, and His plan was for a child to be born from Abraham through Sarah, not Hagar, and it would be born at a time when it was an obvious miracle, given by God and evident to all who witnessed it.

So when our lives are not as fruitful as we think they should be or we are not accomplishing as much as we think we should, or the church is not growing the way we expect it, then we try to ramp up our effort – more committee meetings, bigger

fundraising drives, more outreach programs – let’s get going people – it all depends on us!

Do you see how wrong that is? The Bible teaches that unless the Lord builds the house the laborers work in vain (Psalm 127:1). Our task as Christians is to faithfully follow God’s already revealed will for our lives and then when God wants us for a specific task, we will be ready for Him to show it to us.

In the application portion of his letter, Paul pleaded with the Roman Christians to do just this.

Ask God for direction. He doesn’t expect us to do it on our own.

I appeal to you

therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. Romans 12: 1-2

A second lesson we learn from this episode is...

not to take pride in ourselves, but to humbly consider how we might use God’s gifts to serve others.

Take Hagar for an example – her initial arrogance was

shameful. In her defense, she probably did not know the God of Abraham until He introduced Himself to her. She acted the way we often act when we forget that everything comes from the Lord. Hagar had no more control over becoming pregnant than did Sarah, so why take pride in being pregnant as if she had done it and then look down on someone who had not gotten pregnant? I am sure that after she met the Angel of the Lord, Hagar returned to Abraham’s tents a different person from the one who had run away.

All the talents and abilities that we have are God’s gifts to us. This is true with your fast feet, or your beautiful face or voice, or your organizational skills, or language skills, or knack for fixing things, or the ease with which you make friends – they all come from the Lord! So Paul’s very next advice to those Roman Christians was,

For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function,

so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another. Romans 12:3-5.

Let's learn to be humble about all we are and have and to give God the glory for what He has given.

A third lesson we can learn is that

God sees and is always with us.

I was surprised the other day to learn that "Aloha" the traditional Hawaiian greeting and "Sawubona" the most common greeting in the Zulu language literally mean the same thing: "I see you, you are important to me and I value you." The last, least, and lost, often feel invisible to others and perhaps even to God. A greeting such as "Aloha, Sawubona" makes the other person visible to us, reminding us to love them who ever and where ever they are.

- God saw Abraham and Sarah, and God also saw Hagar and Ishmael within her.
 - God sees you and me, too! He sees us at our best and He sees us at our worst.
 - God sees what we are facing and what we need.
 - God sees how hard we are trying to be faithful and to please Him.
 - God sees how overwhelmed you are in caring for your children, your spouse, or your aging parents.
 - God sees the challenges you are facing at work, or school, or in your marriage.
 - And God sees when loneliness eats away at you.
- God sees. God cares. And God is with us and will help us.

When God sees us in the hard place, His will is usually not for us to run and hide from the difficulty but to stay and allow Him to mold us through the hard times. He told Hagar to go back and submit to her mistress and that He would be with her in this. God enabled Hagar to do the hard thing, and He will do the same for us.

Finally, this fourth lesson, sort of grows out of the first:

Learn to patiently wait upon the Lord.

Multiple times, scripture encourages us to be patient with God's timing.

Psalm 33:20 says: We wait in hope for the LORD; he is our help and our shield.

Psalm 27:14 says: Wait for the LORD; be strong and take heart and wait for the LORD.

Isaiah 40:31 says: those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.

But waiting is hard to do. We like things to be fast.

- We like fast food, and the fast lane.
- We want instant downloads and overnight delivery.

Why do we like things fast? Because our rich consumerist culture has conditioned us to be impatient by our ability to get just about anything we want as soon as we want it.

Patience is one of our lost character strengths that perhaps this quarantine can re-teach us.

So we missed our monthly barber or hair and nail appointments... think of how much more you will get for your money when next you sit in their chair.

So we have run out of television programs to watch... it is time to pick up a book or plant the garden.

It is usually in waiting that God does His best work in us.

Richard Hendrix said: "*Second only to suffering, waiting may be the greatest teacher and trainer in godliness, maturity, and genuine spirituality most of us ever encounter.*"

When we are forced to wait, the Lord helps us acquire an appreciation for the blessing to come. Meanwhile, while we wait, God builds our maturity so that when the fulfillment does come, we are prepared to enjoy His blessing to the fullest.

In his book, *Sabbatical Journeys*, Henri Nouwen writes about some friends of his who were trapeze artists - They were called "the Flying Roudellas."

They told Nouwen there's a special relationship between flyer and catcher on the trapeze. The flyer is the one that lets go, and the catcher is the one that catches. As the flyer swings high above the crowd on the trapeze, the moment comes when he or she must let go. Then, as they arc out into the air, their job is to remain as still as possible and wait for the strong hands of the catcher to pluck them from the air. "*The*

flyer must never try to catch the catcher." The flyer must wait in absolute trust. The catcher will catch him, but he must wait.

(John Ortberg, "Waiting on God," Preaching Today #199)

So it is in our relationship with God - we must never try to catch the Catcher. We must learn to wait with patience and absolute trust - God will catch us if we wait.

But if we try to help Him out, we could end up falling flat on our faces. So we must wait on Him who hears and sees us. It's the only way to fly! It's the only way to experience all that God has for us.

Let us pray about this.