

Chapter 8: The Concubine of Abram

Genesis 16:1–16

In the previous chapter, we studied two critical elements in the life of Abram. First, the Scriptures clarified the nature of Abram's faith: Abram "believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness" (Gen. 15:6). Second, Yahweh confirmed the truthfulness of his promises by entering into a covenant with Abram (Gen. 15:18). Both of these elements reflect the strain on Abram's faith during the time before Yahweh fulfills his promises to Abram. So, to clarify the spirit in which Abram asked all his doubting questions (Gen. 15:2–3, 8), the Scriptures tell us that Abram is asking these questions from true, living faith. Then, to assure us that Yahweh's words are not empty, Yahweh swears by covenant that he will go so far as to have his own body broken and blood shed to uphold everything he has promised for Abram. If Yahweh simply fulfilled his promises, though, neither of these elements would be necessary. Abram would no longer need to walk by faith, and Yahweh would not need to supplement his word with a covenant, since Abram would already have by sight what Yahweh promised by faith.

We cannot understand Genesis 16 unless we recognize this great strain on Abram's faith. Remember, Abram ends up living in the Promised Land for twenty-five years before his son Isaac is born as the fulfillment of Yahweh's promises (Gen. 12:3; Gen. 21:5). Over that long period of time, Yahweh progressively draws Abram to himself, encourages Abram's faith, and shepherds Abram toward repentance and faith after failures. Furthermore, Abram is not the only one whose faith is tested. Abram's wife, Sarai, must not only wait for the promised offspring long past normal child-bearing years, but she must also endure the shame of childlessness that was profound in those days. Over time, it becomes increasingly difficult to continue praying to God for him to keep his promises. Is God still even listening to them?

In the midst of all this unfulfilled longing, Genesis 16 tells the story of one of Abram's and Sarai's largest lapses of faith. Intriguingly, Abram and Sarai falter not because they want something Yahweh has forbidden, nor because they abandon hope in Yahweh's good promise. Instead, their failure arises when they become so desperate for the good gifts God has promised them that they are willing to do absolutely anything to lay hold of those gifts immediately, rather than waiting on God's timing. Just like in Genesis 12:10–20, Abram and Sarai begin to doubt God's promises, so they conspire to take matters into their own hands. In this passage, however, the big idea takes a more constructive shape by encouraging us to press on in our faith: *Even when God seems silent, God sees and God hears.*

God is Not Silent (Gen. 16:1–6)

We do not know how much time passes between the magnificent covenant of Genesis 15 and catastrophic sin of Genesis 16. We do know, however, that Abram has been in the Promised Land for ten years (Gen. 16:3), and that he is eighty-six years old by the end of the chapter (Gen. 16:16; cf.

Gen. 12:4). By this point, Abram's old age and the long passage of time without a child are beginning to test his faith severely. Abram has already begun lamenting the fact that he has not seen the fulfillment of Yahweh's promises to him (Gen. 15:2–3). The establishment of the covenant in Genesis 15 assured Abram of Yahweh's intentions to keep his covenant promises for Abram. Nevertheless, Genesis 16 opens with an acknowledgement of the painful reality that Abram's wife, Sarai, is still without child: "Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children" (Gen. 16:1a).

A Famine of Childbirth

As mentioned above, Genesis 16 echoes and parallels the story of Abram's faithless sin in Genesis 12:10–20. That passage also opened with a problem: "Now there was a famine in the land" (Gen. 12:10a). This time, the problem is not the fruitlessness of the land, but the fruitlessness of Abram's wife, Sarai.¹ Earlier, Abram acted apart from faith by going down to Egypt to solve his problems by his own wisdom: "So Abram went down to Egypt to sojourn there, for the famine was severe in the land" (Gen. 12:10b). In that story, Abram eventually gave Sarai over to Pharaoh as a wife, so that Sarai was passive and silent throughout Genesis 12.² This time around, Sarai is the one who takes the initiative by identifying another faithless solution related to Egypt: "She had a female Egyptian servant whose name was Hagar" (Gen. 16:1b). Indeed, Abram and Sarai most likely acquired Hagar during their time in Egypt as Pharaoh's bride-price for Sarai (Gen. 12:16).³ Abram is not entirely silent in Genesis 16, but he is certainly passive. Sarai is setting the agenda, and Abram merely agrees to whatever his wife suggests (cf. Gen. 16:2–3).⁴

Both narratives, then, draw a contrast between two general solutions: in each circumstance, Abram and Sarai can either walk by faith or by sight. Furthermore, in both cases the holy family has every reason to walk by faith, since their failures follow immediately after hearing a word from Yahweh. In Genesis 12, Abram had not only received his initial revelation from Genesis 12:1–3, but Yahweh had freshly appeared to Abram, promising him that "To your offspring I will give this land" (Gen. 12:7). In Genesis 16, Abram has something even more than Yahweh's word, since Yahweh has supplemented and confirmed his word by covenant in Genesis 15. God is not silent as Abram and Sarai consider their disastrous courses of action, since his word is still ringing in their ears.

Often, we justify our own sin by appealing to God's seeming silence. "God has not explicitly forbidden this relationship, this activity, or this thought," we reason to ourselves. By this, we do not mean that God's word is altogether silent about our situation, but simply that God's word lacks a sufficiently precise proof-text. When we do this, we are not genuinely seeking to obey God, but only to create wiggle-room to excuse our sin. God, however, exercises his sovereignty over every element of our lives *without* micro-managing us by overly detailed instructions. Rather, God's word continues to speak by applying the same truths to new, fresh, specific circumstances in the life of every person. Satan, on the other hand, undercuts what God has already spoken with his insidious question, "Did God actually say...?" (Gen. 3:1). Nevertheless, God does not chime in with brand new revelation to address every predicament we encounter. Instead, God wants to train us how to listen to him by directing us back to the study of what he has already said. God is not silent, for his word still speaks.

Abram already knows that Yahweh has promised that his heir will come from his own body (Gen. 15:4), and he knows that God has created marriage as a one-flesh union between one man and

one woman (Gen. 2:24; cf. Gen. 12:18–19). Therefore, if Abram listens carefully to the whole counsel of God, he should already know that his offspring will come through Sarai. Abram's problem is not the silence of God, but his own unbelieving heart.

A Human Solution to a Divine Promise

Still, it is Sarai, and not Abram, who spearheads their disobedience:

[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.” 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. (Gen. 16:2–3)

When Sarai tells Abram that Yahweh has “prevented” her from bearing children, she is acknowledging the biblical notion that Yahweh alone opens and closes wombs (e.g., Gen. 1:28; 3:16; 4:1). Indeed, the Bible teaches that “Yahweh is the ultimate source behind all of life's experiences, from the exhilarating to the annoying and depressing.”⁵ Even so, we should probably hear some amount of bitterness in her voice. Sarai is not praising Yahweh, even though Yahweh is showing his glory by delaying the coming of the child of promise until she is an elderly woman. Later, when Yahweh explicitly promises that she will have a son, Sarai laughs at the notion (Gen. 18:12). In this statement, Sarai is blaming Yahweh for her condition.

So, Sarai proposes a simple solution. She knows that Yahweh is preventing her from bearing children, but she also knows that Yahweh has promised that Abram will indeed gain a biological son (Gen. 15:4). Therefore, Sarai believes that she must act to fill the gap between God's promise and God's preventing the *fulfillment* of that promise. So, Sarai puts forward a plan for a barren woman to gain a child: surrogate pregnancy. Abram will “go in to” her servant Hagar, and, when Hagar becomes pregnant, that child will count as Sarai's child. This was a common practice throughout the ancient world, since it allowed wealthy, barren women to give their husbands heirs without conferring to the child-bearing woman the full benefits of marriage: “The mistress could then feel that her maid's child was her own and exert some control over it in a way that she could not if her husband simply took a second wife. So Sarai here expresses the hope that she may ‘have sons through her.’”⁶

Without question, this solution is wicked. Sarai instructs her husband to commit adultery in direct violation of God's laws concerning marriage.⁷ The narrator subtly brings out the horror of this arrangement by redundantly identifying Sarai as “Abram's wife” twice (Gen. 16:1, 3) and identifying Abram as “her husband” (Gen. 16:3).⁸ Genesis 16:3 is especially tortured: “...Sarai, *Abram's wife*, took Hagar the Egyptian, her servant, and gave her to Abram *her husband as a wife*.” This is Genesis 12:10–20 all over again, but in reverse. Previously, Abram gave his wife Sarai to an Egyptian husband. Now, Sarai gives her husband Abram an Egyptian wife. Later, Yahweh will forbid his people from taking foreign wives (Deut. 7:1–6), and he specifically forbids Israel from taking wives from the nations whom Yahweh has just promised to expel from the Promised Land in Genesis 15:19–21.⁹ More than simply a foreign marriage, Victor Hamilton observes that the Book of Proverbs bears witness to the utter foolishness of this arrangement of a mistress giving her

maidservant to her husband:

The whole event and its unusual character are reflected in the OT's wisdom literature: "Under three things the earth trembles, under four it cannot bear up:...and a maid...when she succeeds her mistress..." (Prov. 30:21–23). These ["maid" and "mistress"] are the two terms used in Gen. 16 to describe the relationship of Sarai and Hagar to each other.¹⁰

This relationship is not only sinful, it is foolish.

The Fall of Sarai

To underscore the sinful severity of this act even further, the narrative echoes the story of the fall of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3.¹¹ The phrase "And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai" (Gen. 16:2) echoes Yahweh's condemning words to Adam in his cursing oracle: "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife..." (Gen. 3:17).¹² Additionally, consider Genesis 16:3: "Sarai, Abram's wife [literally, *woman*], took Hagar the Egyptian, her servant, and gave her to Abram *her husband* as a wife." This line is virtually identical with Genesis 3:6: "...the *woman*...took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to *her husband* who was with her, and he ate": "The sequence of events is similar in both cases: the woman takes something and gives it to her husband, who accepts it."¹³ By listening to the voice of his wife and taking the forbidden fruit that she gave to him, Abram falls into sin just as Adam did in the garden of Eden.

If Abram corresponds to Adam in his sinful passivity, Sarai corresponds to Eve in her sinful initiative. If so, then we must keep in mind the reason *why* Eve ultimately took the fruit: "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..." (Gen. 3:6). Eve believed that she could only obtain some great *good* (wisdom) by disobeying God's commandment. She did not intend to commit evil for the sake of evil; nevertheless, she justified the means of disobedience in order to pursue some good end. On this point, John Calvin wisely writes:

Moreover, since Sarai, that holy woman, yet fanned in her husband the same flame of impatience with which she burned, we may hence learn, how diligently we ought to be on our guard, lest Satan should surprise us by any secret fraud. For not only does he induce wicked and ungodly men openly to oppose our faith; but sometimes, privately and by stealth, he assails us through the medium of good and simple men, that he may overcome us unawares. On every side, therefore, we must be on our guard against his wiles; lest by any means he should undermine us.¹⁴

How, then, do we recognize and resist Satan's wiles when he takes a similar approach with us?

Satan works most powerfully when he can hijack our impatient desires for something that is truly good. Eve did not wake up in the morning hungry for a new kind of fruit; she wanted God's wisdom, and the serpent led her to believe that God would never give her that wisdom unless she took it for herself. In the same way, Sarai did not wake up in the morning overwhelmed with a desire for her husband to sleep with another woman. Rather, she woke up in the morning consumed with desire to obtain the offspring that God had promised to give her: "Behold, now, the LORD has

prevented me from bearing children” (Gen. 16:2). Then, the desires of her heart twisted her logic in a diabolical direction: if God *wants* to give her this offspring, why shouldn’t she do whatever it takes to obtain it? She may have even justified her actions by stoking self-pity over the great, martyr-like sacrifices she would have to make as she watched her husband disappear into another room with her servant. Who could accuse Sarai of wrongdoing when she, in fact, is the *victim* of God’s providence? God was the one who made the promise, but he has not kept it. If Sarai must now do the dirty work of fulfilling God’s promises for him, then the blame belongs with *God*, not her. How quickly Satan can turn us against our loving Father!

As we consider these things, we must be careful to separate out the goodness of our *desires* from the evil of *disobedience*. Satan tries to force us into a false dilemma: *either* we disobey *or* we forfeit our deepest desires. God teaches us a different kind of logic: we must seek *first* his kingdom and his righteousness, and *then* all these other things will be added to us (Matt. 6:33). God does not want to deprive us, but we cannot *first* pursue the things we desire. Instead, we must submit ourselves to his ways and his timing, and we will gain far more abundantly than we could have ever thought or imagined. David expresses the same thought when he writes, “Delight yourself in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart” (Ps. 37:4). The most powerful weapon against Satan’s lies is to continue preaching to ourselves that God does not want to *withhold* something good from us; rather, he wants to give us something *better*. By seeking first God’s kingdom and his righteousness, we will gain *all* these things, but by pursuing these other things first, we will lose everything—both the things that we wanted and God’s kingdom as well.

Sarai’s Expanding Sin

Tragically, Sarai does not engage in one single sin. Rather, her course of action fixes her into a path that leads her into several sins that grow in magnitude over the course of the narrative. First, we should notice how Sarai demeans and dehumanizes Hagar throughout this passage. Most importantly, “Sarai never addresses or talks of Hagar by name, but only by label or role, *my maidservant*.”¹⁵ Indeed, the specific word for “[female] servant” (Gen. 16:1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 8) used to describe Hagar in this passage seems to suggest that, at this point, Hagar is primarily under the authority of Sarai rather than Abram.¹⁶ In Sarai’s eyes, Hagar is not a human being made in the image of God; she is property to be used and abused as Sarai sees fit. If Sarai was powerless in Egypt, Sarai now wields all the power, so that it is the Egyptian slave who “has no choice in the matter.”¹⁷

Again, Sarai is not only morally wrong, but foolish. Sarai is playing with fire when she sends her husband to go in to another woman. Nevertheless, Sarai is shocked when she gets burned in the process:

[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. [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!” [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. (Gen. 16:4–6)

We should probably notice that the text does not even name Abram: “And he went in to Hagar.”

The reason for omitting Abram’s name may be to convey the idea that “Abram and Hagar are simply instruments of Sarai.”¹⁸ Alternately, withholding Abram’s name could simply reflect how utterly wicked this act is.

When Hagar conceives, the plot begins to unravel for Sarai: “And when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress” (Gen. 16:4b). We may translate the phrase “looked with contempt” more literally as, “she dishonored her mistress in her eyes.” The word for “dishonored” is the same word Yahweh spoke to Abram in Genesis 12:3: “...him who *dishonors* you I will curse...” Allen Ross writes, “It is too strong to say that Hagar cursed Sarai or treated her with contempt. She may have looked on her mistress insolently. The word probably describes an unavoidable response to the situation, a response developing from the maternal pride of Hagar in her new status.”¹⁹ Even so, Abram and Sarai’s choices have created a dilemma: Abram is now united to a woman who dishonors Abram’s wife.

If we suspected that Sarai might be nursing a martyr complex, her angry words to Abram in Genesis 16:5 confirm that suspicion. She explodes against her husband, blaming him and asking Yahweh to judge between them for doing the very thing that she told him to do. Earlier, Adam blamed both Eve *and* God for his sin: “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate” (Gen. 3:12). In turn, Eve blamed the serpent for deceiving her into sinning (Gen. 3:13). Now, Sarai follows this shameful pattern by blaming both Abram and Hagar for the consequences of her own scheme. When Sarai speaks about the “wrong” done to her (Gen. 16:5), she uses a word for “violence” that also describes “the sins that prompted the flood (6:11, 13) and the vicious retaliation wreaked by Simeon and Levi (49:5; cf. 34:25).”²⁰ In other words, Sarai not only *blames* everyone else for her sins; she brings severe charges of violence against them.

For the first time in the narrative, Abram speaks: “Behold, your servant is in your power; do to her as you please” (Gen. 16:6). Earlier, he passively listened to his wife’s voice (Gen. 16:2), and now he passively defers judgment not to Yahweh (as Sarai disingenuously suggested) but back to Sarai. Abram even follows Sarai’s lead in the way that he speaks of Hagar not by her name, but by her *status* as Sarai’s property (“servant”), or simply as a nameless “her.”²¹ In response, Sarai “deals harshly” with Hagar, causing Hagar to “flee” from her (Gen. 16:6). Derek Kidner insightfully observes, “Each of the three characters displays the untruth that is part of sin, in false pride (4), false blame (5), false neutrality (6); but Sarai’s mask soon slipped (6b), to show the hatred behind the talk of justice.”²² If the previous section illustrates Sarai’s fall, Sarai’s escalation of violence follows the pattern of what came after the original Fall, when Cain murdered Abel. Sin begets disproportionately more sin.

The Exodus of Hagar (Part I)

The words for “deal harshly” and “flee” in Genesis 16:6 create a surprising connection to another narrative in Scripture. Elsewhere, “deal harshly” is translated as *affliction*, and it will also describe Jacob’s affliction during his captivity in the house of Laban (Gen. 31:42), Joseph’s affliction during his captivity in Egypt (Gen. 41:52), and Israel’s affliction during their captivity in the house of Egypt (Gen. 15:13; Ex. 1:11, 12). The captivity in Egypt seems to be the main affliction in view, since the word for “flee” is a word that describes Israel’s eventual exodus out of Egypt (Ex. 14:5).²³ Shockingly, though, “the roles of oppressor and oppressed are just the opposite from Exodus. Here it is a matriarch of Israel oppressing an Egyptian.”²⁴ As we will continue to see in both the rest of Genesis 16 and then again in Genesis 21:8–21, the text of Genesis sets up Hagar and her son Ishmael as “a

shadow, almost a parody” of Israel.²⁵ Their future of Ishmael and Ishmael’s offspring will be protected, to some degree, by the promises that Yahweh made to Abram; however, because Ishmael will *not* be the son of God’s covenant promises (Gen. 17:18–21; 21:12–13). The fact that the Egyptian Hagar must flee in exodus out of the oppression of *Abram’s* house of bondage, though, tells us much about the severity of Abram’s and Sarai’s sin.

God Speaks (Gen. 16:7–12)

In Genesis 16:7, the scene changes. No longer are we in the house of Abram, and no longer is Sarai the dominant character; here, we meet Hagar on her flight out of Canaan and back toward Egypt, at the spring on the way to Shur.²⁶ If we that Abram and Sarai are still in Hebron (Gen. 13:18), this means that Hagar has travelled no small distance.²⁷

[7] The angel of the LORD found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur. [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.” (Gen. 16:7–8)

This is our first encounter with the “the angel of Yahweh,” although it will not be our last. Gordon Wenham writes:

“The angel of the LORD”...is mentioned fifty-eight times in the OT, “the angel of God” eleven times. Angels of the LORD appear either singly as here or in groups. When first seen, they are usually taken to be men, but by the end of the encounter one of them is realized to be God (18:2, 22; Judg 6:11–22; 13:3–22). When, as here, the text simply speaks of a single angel of the LORD, this must be understood as God himself appearing in human form, nearly always to bring good news or salvation.²⁸

Indeed, Hagar will eventually identify “the angel of Yahweh” as Yahweh himself (Gen. 16:13). This is no mere messenger. As Victor Hamilton puts it, “The angel of Yahweh is more a representation of God than a representative of God.”²⁹

When the angel of Yahweh speaks, he addresses Hagar directly by her name and by her title: “Hagar, servant of Sarai.” Then, the angel of Yahweh poses two questions: “...where have you come from and where are you going?” (Gen. 16:8). It may seem odd for the all-knowing God to ask Hagar about her origin and her destination, but they further connect this story with the Genesis 3 account of the Fall. There, after Adam and Eve sinned, Yahweh called to the man, asking “Where are you?” (Gen. 3:9).³⁰ Hagar answers honestly, informing the angel of Yahweh that she is fleeing from her mistress, Sarai.

A Command and a Promise

Each of the next three verses open with the phrase, “And the angel of Yahweh said to her....” (Gen. 16:9–11). Through this threefold repetition, the narration draws special attention to the words of the angel of Yahweh.³¹ Indeed, Allen Ross makes an important point for our interpretation of this passage: “It is important in studying narrative literature to concentrate on the

dialogue, especially the speeches from the Lord, for they usually underscore the point of the narrative. In this passage the story itself is not the message; the Word from the Lord is the message, and the story is the setting for the Word.”³² Hear, then, the word of Yahweh:

[9] The angel of the LORD said to her, “Return to your mistress and submit to her.” [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.” (Gen. 16:9–12)

At this point in the narrative, we cannot help but to sympathize with Hagar. She has been thoroughly mistreated not only by Sarai, but also by Abram. Nevertheless, Yahweh first addresses Hagar with a command: “Return to your mistress and submit to her.” This command is harsher than it sounds at first, since the word “submit” is a verbal form of the phrase “deal harshly” (Gen. 16:6)—the same word used to describe the “oppression” and “affliction” that Israel suffers in Egypt (Gen. 15:13; Ex. 1:11, 12).³³ Remarkably, though, Yahweh does not say this because he seeks Hagar’s *harm*, but her *good*. Immediately, he follows his command with a promise: “I will surely multiply your offspring so that they cannot be numbered for multitude” (Gen. 16:10). In this way, Yahweh’s words to Hagar resemble the original call that Yahweh gave to Abram: Yahweh not only commanded Abram to suffer by *going* somewhere (Gen. 12:1), but he also joined promises to that commandment (Gen. 12:2–3). Even the promise to multiply her offspring so that they cannot be numbered for multitude echoes the explicit promises that Yahweh made to Abram (Gen. 13:16; 15:5; 17:8; 18:14; 22:17), Isaac (26:4), and Jacob (28:3, 4); this is the only time, however, that these promises are made to a woman.³⁴ Neither Sarai, nor Rebekah, nor Leah, nor Rachel hear this promise from Yahweh—only Hagar.

More than that, this combination of command/suffering and promise/blessing resembles the nature of the covenant promises that Yahweh promised to Abram in the previous chapter. Just as Abram’s offspring must suffer under Egyptian affliction as they await the fulfillment of Yahweh’s promises (Gen. 15:13–16), so the Egyptian Hagar must return to suffer under Abram’s affliction as she awaits the fulfillment of Yahweh’s promises to her.³⁵ Yes, Hagar must suffer, but she will suffer in the same manner that Abram will suffer. That is, Hagar’s suffering will lead to some of the same blessings as Abram will receive. Yahweh sends Hagar back to Abram not to harm her, but rather because “her lot was cast with Abram now, and God’s exacting goodness held her to it (9, 15).”³⁶ Abram and Sarai mistreat Hagar, but Yahweh redeems their mistreatment by including Hagar in the blessings that Yahweh reserved for Abram alone.

Promises for Ishmael

Accordingly, Yahweh instructs Hagar to name her son *Ishmael* (“God hears”) to commemorate the way that Yahweh *heard* her affliction (Gen. 16:11). In general, explanations of the origins of names in the Bible function “to capture and retain the significance of narratives....They are rhetorical devices that draw from the experience in the account the explanation of the name. Accordingly, the name becomes an aid for remembering the events and their significance.”³⁷ In the immediate moment, this promise offers Hagar comfort in the midst of her difficult journey ahead as she returns to affliction.³⁸ Over the longer term, the theme of hearing will shape the rest of Ishmael’s life: Yahweh promises to “hear” Abraham in regard to Ishmael (Gen. 17:20), and then Yahweh intervenes to save Hagar and Ishmael after “hearing” the voice of Ishmael in the wilderness (Gen. 21:17).³⁹

Nevertheless, while Yahweh makes promises for Ishmael, we must carefully recognize that Ishmael is not the child of promise. The promises for Ishmael are purely *temporal* in nature; Isaac’s promises, on the other hand, *include* temporal blessings, but they ultimately point toward *eternal* blessings as well.⁴⁰ So, Ishmael will be a “wild donkey of a man,” who both initiates attacks and endures attacks, and lives in perpetual warfare with his neighbors. As Gordon Wenham observes, “This verse describes Ishmael’s future destiny, to enjoy a free-roaming, bedouinlike existence. The freedom his mother sought will be his one day.”⁴¹ Therefore, Ishmael will multiply into twelve princes (Gen. 17:20; 25:12–18), experience his own exodus and wilderness wandering (Gen. 21:14), and eventually escape his oppression as he dwells “over against all his kinsmen” (Gen. 16:12; 25:18). Still, Ishmael does not enter into God’s covenant (Gen. 17:19), and neither is he the child of promise (Gen. 21:12); those blessings will belong to Isaac alone. Derek Kidner summarizes the legacy of Ishmael well:

Enough that Ishmael would multiply, and be at nobody’s beck and call. To some degree this son of Abram would be a shadow, almost a parody, of his father, his twelve princes notable in their times (17:20; 25:13) but not in the history of salvation; his restless existence no pilgrimage but an end in itself; his nonconformism a habit of mind, not a light to the nations.⁴²

God Sees, and God Hears (Gen. 16:13–16)

Hagar responds to these marvelous promises with wonder:

[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. (Gen. 16:13–14)

Importantly, we do not read that Hagar calls *upon* the name of Yahweh, as the text has told us about Abram (Gen. 12:8; 13:4; cf. Gen. 4:26); rather, we read that Hagar “*she called the name* [or named] *Yahweh who spoke with her*....Hagar actually confers on deity a name. No other character in the OT, male or female, does that.”⁴³ Here, Hagar names Yahweh “a God of seeing.” The name that Yahweh

gives Hagar’s son (Ishmael) will remind her that God *hears*, and the name that Hagar gives Yahweh will remind her that God *sees*.

The God of Seeing

Hagar continues, noting that not only has God seen her, but, even more wonderfully, *she* has seen God: “Truly here I have *seen* him who looks after me.”⁴⁴ The last part of this verse is difficult to translate, but it may either refer to a God who *looks* after her, or to the fact that she has “seen the back of Him who has seen me.”⁴⁵ Either way, the reference deals with Hagar’s seeing God *and* God’s seeing Hagar. Even in the name Hagar gives to Yahweh, “the God of seeing,” there is an ambiguity so that it may legitimately mean either “A God who may be seen” or “a God who sees.”⁴⁶ Both meanings are essential.

As one final note to close out this scene, it is intriguing to learn that all of this happens not only at a “spring of water in the wilderness” (Gen. 16:7), but at a *well* (Gen. 16:14). This is significant, since many of the patriarchs meet their spouses at wells (Gen. 24:10–28; 29:1–12; Ex. 2:16–22), but there is another interesting angle to this story. Here in Genesis 16, we have a story where God initiates a conversation with woman with a dubious marital status at a well. This woman is an Egyptian, but the child in her womb is of a mixed race: the offspring of a Gentile *and* the offspring of Abram. During this encounter, God shows kindness to the woman and makes promises to her, and then, after the conversation is finished, she returns to her people, proclaiming that this God has truly *seen* her for who she is. In this light, it is hard to avoid thinking of the story of Jesus’ encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4.

God Hears

By the end of Genesis 16, the narratives ties up the loose ends of the story, even if it does not necessarily resolve all the conflict between Sarai and Hagar. We will read more about that conflict in Genesis 21:

[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. (Gen. 16:15–16)

Victor Hamilton observes, “Hagar’s name appears three times and Abram’s name four times. But Sarai is conspicuously absent!”⁴⁷ Sarai, who appeared so prominently in the first part of this story, now fades into the background. Abram names Ishmael (Gen. 16:15), obeying the word of Yahweh that Hagar brought back upon her return.⁴⁸ The fact that Abram names Ishmael may also suggest that Sarai’s plans of gaining a child through Hagar (Gen. 16:2) have completely fallen apart. Later, Jacob’s wife Rachel will name the children born to Jacob through her maidservant Bilhah (Gen. 30:6–7), and Jacob’s wife Leah will name the children born to Jacob through her maidservant Zilpah (Gen. 30:11, 13), which makes these children (Dan, Naphtali, Gad, and Asher) full-fledged children of Jacob, equal with the sons born directly to Leah and to Rachel. The fact that Sarai does not name Ishmael means that Sarai has no portion with him. Ishmael belongs to Abram and Hagar, but not in any sense to Sarai.⁴⁹

The point of this story, then, seems to center on the name that Abram gives this boy: “God

hears.” Allen Ross writes this:

The culmination of the story provides the lesson for the whole unit. It records God’s direct revelation and Hagar’s faith response. God sees distress and affliction and hears the cry for help. Abram and Sarai should have known this. God knew that Sarai was barren. She knew that God knew she was barren. She should have cried out to the Lord as Hannah later did (1 Sam. 1:5, 10). Instead, Sarai had to learn the hard way—from the experience of the despised slave wife who came back with the faith and experience and the word from God—Ishmael. Sarai did not cry out but took human calculations; Hagar thereby benefited from God’s provision instead of Sarai, so that she came to know more of God’s presence in distress than did Sarai. The Lord sent her back to the tense situation from which she fled, but he sent her with a message and with hope.⁵⁰

Therefore, although Hagar is initially mistreated, she “comes out best in the end” as Abram’s wife, with divine promises for her and for her son.⁵¹ Abram and Sarai, on the other hand, must be humbled by their lack of faith each time they hear Ishmael’s name.⁵² Rather than bringing Sarai’s infertility to Yahweh in prayer, believing that Yahweh is a God who hears *and* who sees, they took matters into their own hands and ended up with a mess. This is a mistake Isaac apparently learns from, since he later *prays* that Yahweh will open his wife’s womb (Gen. 25:21).⁵³

God Sees, and God Hears

The theme of this narrative is that God hears, and God sees. Later on, this theme forms the foundation for God’s deliverance of his people out of Egypt. As the affliction of God’s people gets to its worse, we read: “[24] And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. [25] God saw the people of Israel—and God knew” (Ex. 2:24–25). Here, we see that God *hears* and *sees*, and also that God *remembers* his covenant and God *knows* the affliction of his people. God deals kindly with Hagar in light of her affliction, and because of her incidental involvement in the blessings that he promised to Abram. Still, God goes much further in the way he addresses the affliction of his own people. Their affliction is longer and more severe, and yet their covenant promises are better and God’s work on their behalf is more glorious.

Furthermore, what is true of God’s involvement with Israel is far more abundantly true of God’s action on behalf of his people at the cross. God recognized that we were enslaved to *sin*, a far more cruel taskmaster than the Egyptians ever were (Rom. 6:20). So, God freed us from that slavery by pouring out affliction on the head of his own, beloved Son at the cross. There, Jesus groaned in agony, but in order to free his people from their captivity, the Father had to forsake his Son (Mark 15:34). The Father chose *not* to see or to hear the afflictions of his Son so that he could save us from our sins. Satan lies to us when he tells us that God does not care about our situation. Even when God seems silent, the cross proves once and for all that God sees, and God hears us.

Discussion Questions

1. Where does God seem silent in your life right now? What answer do you long to hear from him? What human solutions are you considering to take matters into your own hands? How has God

already given you the wisdom you need in his word? How is God asking you to walk by faith? What are the dangers of walking by sight?

2. How does Satan hijack our good, godly desires into temptations for sin? What kind of frauds does Satan attempt to perpetrate in your life by oppressing you with the false dilemma of choosing between disobedience and disappointment? Does God withhold good gifts from us? What evidence of God's faithfulness can you identify to fight Satan's lies?

3. What commands bring affliction in your life? What does God seek from those commands? What promises does he add to those commands to encourage your obedience? Is it always better to obey than to disobey? What makes this principle so difficult to understand in the heat of the moment? In what areas do you struggle most to believe this right now?

4. Does God see you? Does God hear you? What tempts you to believe that God does not see or hear you? How does prayer help us to learn about how God sees and hears us? What evidence does the cross of Jesus give us that God sees and hears us? How does God's word continue to speak comfort to us today, even when God seems silent, blind, and deaf?

Notes

1. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 318–19.

2. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, 446.

3. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 319.

4. Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, WBC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 4.

5. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, 443–44.

6. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 7.

7. Calvin, *Genesis*, 423–24. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.xxii.i.html>>

8. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, 443.

9. “The second reference to Hagar as ‘the Egyptian’ is strikingly different from the first. The adjective does not modify “the maiden’ as in verse 1 (‘Egyptian maid’), but stands alone as a substantive along with ‘maid’ in apposition to the personal name Hagar (‘Hagar, the Egyptian, her maid’). In verse 3, then, ‘the Egyptian’ serves as a conspicuous reminder of Hagar’s identity in verse 1, ‘an Egyptian maid.’ The mention of Hagar’s geographical origin appears to function as a connecting link with the geographical list immediately preceding the story (15:18–21), since in that list, the first geographical name is Egypt (15:18). If such a connection is intentional, then it appears that the author is attempting to position the account of Hagar (Ge 16) so that her story is representative of those nations in the preceding list. A way was thus opened for the events in the life of Hagar and Abraham to be interpreted within the larger theological context of Genesis and the Pentateuch where these lists of names occur. Particularly important in this regard are the similarities between Genesis 16 and Deuteronomy 7:1–6, the prohibition of taking foreign wives, a text which had enormous importance to later generations of Israelites.” (Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 153.)

10. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, 448.

11. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 153–54.

12. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 7.

13. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 7–8.
14. Calvin, *Genesis*, 424–25. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.xxii.i.html>>
15. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, 444.
16. “In some contexts שפחה ‘maid’ is interchangeable with אמה ‘slave-girl,’ the usual feminine of עבד ‘slave’ (e.g., Exod 20:10). However, ‘slave-girls’ usually seem to be answerable to a master as opposed to a mistress. Indeed, they often serve a concubines, second-class wives, either because the master has another wife as well or because the girls’ family was too poor to pay a dowry for her (Exod 21:7–11). In this connection, it is interesting that 16:3 states that Hagar was given to Abram as a wife, and in the next episode where she appears, she is called an אמה ‘slave-girl/wife’ (21:10–13).” (Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 6.)
17. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, 446.
18. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 8.
19. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 319.
20. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 8.
21. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, 447–48.
22. Kidner, *Genesis*, 137.
23. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 9.
24. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, 448.
25. Kidner, *Genesis*, 138.
26. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 4.
27. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, 451.
28. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 9.
29. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, 451.
30. “For the first time, Hagar is addressed by name and is called ‘Sarai’s maid.’ This may have surprised Hagar. How could a stranger have known about her identity? The reader, knowing that the stranger is the angel of the LORD, is not surprised. But the question that follows, ‘Where have you come from?’ although sounding quite natural to Hagar, strikes the reader as rhetorical. It is as unnecessary as the LORD asking Adam ‘where are you?’ (3:9) or Cain ‘where is Abel?’ (4:9). This is, in fact, the first time the LORD has asked someone their whereabouts since Gen 4, and it emphasizes the parallel between this story and those earlier ones.” (Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 10.)
31. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 10.
32. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 321.
33. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 10.
34. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, 453.
35. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 10.
36. Kidner, *Genesis*, 137–38.
37. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 321.
38. Kidner, *Genesis*, 138.
39. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 322.
40. Calvin, *Genesis*, 433. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.xxii.i.html>>
41. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 10.
42. Kidner, *Genesis*, 138.
43. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, 455.
44. Kidner, *Genesis*, 138.
45. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 323. Citing Johannes Lindblom, “Theophanies in Holy Places in Hebrew Religion,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* Vol. 32 (1961), 102, n. 21.
46. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, 455.

47. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, 457.
48. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 322.
49. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, 457–58.
50. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 324.
51. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 4.
52. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 324.
53. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 322.