

### 3. Abraham's Shortcut Old Testament Heroes Genesis 16:1-16

On the 10<sup>th</sup> March, 1967, one of the world's largest crude oil tankers of the time ran aground on rocks near the Scilly Isles off the South West coast of England carrying 120,000 tons of crude oil. At the time it was perfectly calm and excellent visibility. The skipper, Captain Pastrengo Rugiati, was neither drunk nor asleep, yet he chose that day to overrule his Number 1 and take a shortcut to go a slightly quicker but more dangerous route between Lands End and the Scilly Isles. Between those two points lay a line of rocks called the Seven Stones. To navigate past them would require pinpoint navigation, with an error of only one mile proving fatal. Bear in mind that the length of the ship was over 1000 feet and its draught 50 feet. Near that point was a lighthouse with men on guard guiding ships away from the rocks. They saw the Torrey Canyon coming toward the rocks and fired their warning rockets. They could see the ship's danger but Captain Rugiati could not. The lighthouse put up their warning flags as well—but on the Torrey Canyon swept, sailing at full speed, 16 knots.

At the very last minute Rugiati realized his error and ordered his helmsman to swing the wheel hard to port, perhaps seeing the tide causing white breaker waves on the rocks themselves. But nothing happened. Horrified, Rugiati remembered that he himself had locked the steering into automatic pilot. He turned the autopilot off and slowly the great ship started to turn. But it was too late. At 8:50 A.M. the Torrey Canyon struck the first of the Seven Stones. Those who reported the accident in detail told how their captain stood on the bridge, speechless as three quarters of the hull was split open and all the oil released into the open ocean heading for the English and French beaches. He had steered his ship and its precious cargo onto well-charted rocks in broad daylight and on a calm day. All of this happened because Captain Rugiati wanted to take a shortcut.

Warm-up Question: Can you think of a shortcut you once took? Were there consequences?

Alternative question: Can you think of a time you shunned sound advice and were there consequences to that decision?

<sup>1</sup>Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. But she had an Egyptian slave named Hagar; <sup>2</sup>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. <sup>3</sup>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. <sup>4</sup>He slept with Hagar, and she conceived. When she knew she was pregnant, she began to despise her mistress. <sup>5</sup>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." <sup>6</sup>"Your slave is in your hands," Abram said. "Do with her whatever

you think best.” Then Sarai mistreated Hagar; so she fled from her. <sup>7</sup>The angel of the LORD found Hagar near a spring in the desert; it was the spring that is beside the road to Shur. <sup>8</sup>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. <sup>9</sup>Then the angel of the LORD told her, “Go back to your mistress and submit to her.” <sup>10</sup>The angel added, “I will increase your descendants so much that they will be too numerous to count.” <sup>11</sup>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. <sup>12</sup>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.” <sup>13</sup>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.” <sup>14</sup>That is why the well was called Beer Lahai Roi; it is still there, between Kadesh and Bered. <sup>15</sup>So Hagar bore Abram a son, and Abram gave the name Ishmael to the son she had borne. <sup>16</sup>Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore him Ishmael (Genesis 16:1-16).

### **Waiting is Part and Parcel of the Faith Walk**

By the time of the event written above, Abram and Sarai had been in Canaan ten years, with Sarai now seventy-five years old and Abram eighty-five (Genesis 12:4 and 16:16). Sarai was starting to lose hope. At such an age it is entirely likely that she was past the childbearing age, physically. Did she feel like she had let the family down? Why wasn’t it happening? Abram had been given a promise that his offspring would become a multitude of people—but they had never been told that it was going to happen through Sarai. When a person’s dream and vision do not seem to be coming to fruition, people often resort to “helping God out.” We start to second guess ourselves and ask the “maybe its this, and maybe its that” kind of questions. Many a servant of God has gone back to their original vision, dream or goal and questioned whether or not they got it right. There is no evidence biblically that Sarai, by this time, had heard what Abram heard. God had only spoken to Abram. The first occurrence of Sarai hearing the Lord speak, that we are told of in scripture, didn’t come for another fifteen years when she heard the conversation between God and Abram about the son that would be born by Sarai at the age of ninety (Genesis 18:10). There is often a waiting period for a God-given vision or revelation of the Lord:

<sup>2</sup>“Write down the revelation and make it plain on tablets so that a herald may run with it. <sup>3</sup>For **the revelation awaits an appointed time**; it speaks of the end and will not prove false. **Though it linger, wait for it; it will certainly come** and will not delay (Habakkuk 2:2-3).

### **What significant waiting period do you remember?**

The third time I visited and stayed in Israel I took my wife Sandy with me and lived there until we became pregnant with Anna, our daughter. We had been married about four years at that point. As we conversed with Arabs and Jews, once they realized that we

were married, the inevitable question was posed, “how many children do you have?” An Israeli woman almost always posed this question. They could not understand that we had been married so long and had no children. To have no children after four years of marriage in the Middle East, at that time, was still puzzling to many. Children and family is a high priority to those in Middle Eastern culture. In Abram and Sarai’s day, children were important as a sign of God’s blessing and to carry on the family name. Sarai’s barrenness was a social stigma and a personal tragedy to them both. We can imagine the many talks that Abram and Sarai may have had regarding God’s promise, which had brought them so far, to the land of Canaan. How they must have agonized over the waiting process, being so advanced in years and still not seeing the fulfillment of this promise.

After ten years of being in the Promised Land and waiting for the first son to come to them, it seems likely that they sat down and evaluated whether Abram had heard God correctly. Perhaps Sarai was feeling like she was letting the family down and was a hindrance to this dream and vision that had brought them all the way from Ur of the Chaldeans, now 2800 miles away. Perhaps she began to think that she was holding things up and that God’s plan was to fulfill the dream another way. It is likely that they were now confronted with the inability for Sarai to conceive, and may have been tempted to think that they got the message wrong. After all, could God mean to fulfill this promise another way? We can look at the whole story from beginning to end, and say to them now: “Abram and Sarai, don’t give up, with God all things are possible!” But we all know how hard it is to experience the waiting process when you are in the middle of it, living through it yourself. When we face those times of waiting, we need to remind ourselves of this:

The inability of man is God’s opportunity to glorify Himself!

### **Sarai and Abram’s Shortcut**

The shortcut was at the initiation of Sarai. There had to be a way around this problem, she thought. Maybe God’s way was for their family to be built around Hagar, their servant girl, who had been added to their household while in Egypt. Commentator R. Kent Hughes writes that this answer to their problem was perfectly logical and acceptable in the culture of the time and had been for a thousand years from Babylon to Egypt:

“Nuzi tablet Number 67 (which describes a marriage arrangement in ancient Mesopotamia) alludes to the surrogate custom: “if Gilimninu bears children, Shennima shall not take another wife. But if Gilimninu fails to bear children, Gilimninu shall get for Shennima a woman from the Lullu country (i.e., a slave girl) as concubine. In that case, Gilimninu herself shall have authority over the offspring.”<sup>1</sup>

This shortcut might have been acceptable to the culture of the time, as indicated by writings of that day, but it wasn’t acceptable to God. Sarai’s motive was probably a good

one, but a good motive does not make a bad decision right. Sarai loved her husband and trusted him implicitly and was willing to sacrifice even their special intimacy with one another for the sake of his vision and dream to be fulfilled. This says a lot for Sarai's commitment and character that she would do this for Abram, but there was no evidence that Abram and Sarai stopped to think about the consequences of what they were about to do. This was a life-changing decision and one wonders if they stopped to ask God about it. Certainly there is nothing in scripture that tells us that they did. This seems to be a low point in Abram's faith walk. For him to go ahead with this shortcut even when he knew in his heart that this was not God's way was resorting to man's way of doing things.

What do you think may have been the reasons why Abram decided to succumb to Sarai's proposal? What are the elements that wear us down as we wait for fulfillment, holding on to God's Word?

Abram seems to be the picture of a passive compliant husband, ready to try anything to get this vision underway. He is not a picture of a godly husband at this time, ready to protect the intimacy of his marriage. His first response to Sarai's idea should have been a courageous, "absolutely not!" There was also no seeking after permission of Hagar's father in Egypt that we are told about. We are not told if Hagar herself had any say in the matter. I'm sure she was asked, but she would have thought to herself that if she didn't go ahead, it would have meant her job, and another of the slave girls would have been chosen over her. It would also have meant demotion if Hagar would have said no. Hagar became a second wife to Abram and, as far as we know, God was not brought into the picture (Verse 3). Of course, God had already revealed His will that a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh (Genesis 2:24). The Lord had not changed His mind and allowed for a threesome!

Things are about to get complicated for Abram and Sarai. It does not take a lot of imagination to see how this could have affected their relationship, their home life, and even their faith. Culture and traditions may change, but there are at least two things that do not, the Word of God, and basic human nature.

In what ways do you think things may have changed for Abram and Sarai once they decided to take this action, and once Hagar had conceived?

### **The God Who Sees and Hears Us**

When Hagar becomes pregnant, it is obvious from the text that there were changes in the household and relationships. Things got messy! Hagar becomes proud and begins to look down upon her mistress. We don't know what is said or the behavior of Hagar, but whatever the attitude of the younger Hagar to the seventy five year old Sarai, it is one of suffering now for Sarai:

<sup>5</sup>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" (Verse 5).

Sarai now blames Abram for his lack of leadership in allowing this shortcut to go ahead, and she is right. Abram was the leader of the home, the one who gets direction from God and leads the family accordingly, yet his leadership is reactionary and seems to go with the flow, rather than seeking God for His direction as to the strife that he has now brought upon his family and into his home. When Sarai brings the situation up with Abram, he should have been the one to sort it out, but instead he throws it all back into Sarai's lap:

**6**“Your slave is in your hands,” Abram said. “Do with her whatever you think best.” Then Sarai mistreated Hagar; so she fled from her (Verse 6).

Abram should have dealt kindly to Hagar and counseled Sarai to do the same. After all, they were the ones who came up with the plan in the first place! Unfortunately, Abram does not bear responsibility for Hagar. Notice how in his response to Sarai, he does not even call Hagar by her name, but calls her ‘Sarai's servant’ (Verse 6). It is as if he is distancing himself from the whole situation, and from Hagar herself, along with the child he is responsible for. It is complete abdication. Hagar is not asked how she feels about all that is going on, and Abram takes little care for her soul. Having been used as a commodity, she is now cast aside. Surely she must be, at this point, a visible reminder of the failure of Abram and Sarai. How many unwanted feelings did this situation breed for all three involved? I'm sure Hagar was left feeling that this baby she is carrying will be unwanted by the family she has been a part of. Hagar must have felt very insecure at a time in life that a woman needs even more security with a baby on the way. Can you imagine her grief and state of mind as she ran away from home? We are told that she went to a deserted place where she sat down by a spring. A deserted place tells us that she wanted to be alone. It is possible she did not feel safe, having been badly treated by Sarai and not sure of their intentions toward her and the child she was carrying. She is retreating, licking her emotional wounds, so to speak, and seeking solitude when an angel comes to her.

### **Hagar and the Angel of the Lord**

It is in that deserted place that the Angel of the Lord speaks to her. This angel is one who has been watching and listening to all that has been going on in the Abrahamic household. He speaks kindly to her and asks two very pertinent questions which is good for all of us to hear, **“where have you come from, and where are you going?”** (Verse 8).

Every now and then as we go through life it is good to sit down and assess where you have come from and where you are going. If you are aiming for nothing, you are bound to hit it!

**Did you ever experience a time in your life when you felt aimless and really did not know which way to go? Was God's direction sought? How did you emerge from that time?**

This angel is no normal angel, but most scholars believe this is an appearance of the

second person of the Trinity. John the apostle in his gospel reminds us that the Lord Jesus preexisted before His taking on human form. He wrote that Jesus was with God in the beginning, and that through Him all things were made, and that without Him nothing was made that has been made (John 1:2-3). This angel does not speak for God, but as God. He says, “I will surely multiply your offspring so that they cannot be numbered for multitude” (Verse 10). This kind of language is not, “this is what the Lord says, but this is what I say!” This is God Himself speaking. Hagar knows who it is that is speaking to her, for she names God, “You are a God of seeing,” and names the well where she encounters the Lord, “Well of the Living One who sees me” (Verse 13). Hagar is given vision and direction for her future. She is told to humble herself and submit herself to her mistress, Sarai and raise Ishmael in Abram’s home. I’m sure her heart was encouraged to learn that she would be mother to many descendants too numerous to count (Verse 10).

Hagar was brought into a new revelation of the Lord on that day. First of all she found out that God hears the cry of distress, and just to remind her, she was told to name her son by the name of Ishmael, which means *God hears*. She was also given the revelation that the God who was watching over her sees all that is going on in her life—it is a good lesson for each of us.

We all have challenging times of waiting when our faith is tested. Even though Abram had many tests to his faith, and although he did not pass all of these tests, he is still referred to as a man of faith in scripture. We do not remember him for his mistakes, but rather for his decision to follow God’s direction and go to a new place he did not know. The legacy he leaves is still one of faith. This is a reminder to us of the great grace God has for us. He does not hold up our mistakes. He takes our damaged lives and leads us home from wherever we find ourselves. Even if that place is a wilderness of our own making.

Maybe you can relate to one of the characters in this part of the story. Are you like Abram, being worn down and weary in the waiting process? Are you like Hagar, finding that you are at a point where you need God’s assurance and His direction? Or, going back to our earlier illustration, are you like the Captain Rugiati, on automatic pilot, hoping for the best? Wherever you are in your journey of faith today, and whatever difficulties you are facing, God has a next step for you. Even if that step is to continue to wait. He has a plan and direction for you, to lead you on from the place that you find yourself right now.

Prayer: Father, thank you for being the God who sees me, as well as the God who hears. Please steer my life to calm waters as I listen to the quiet voice of your Spirit in the dry desert that I often find myself. Amen!

Keith Thomas

Email: [keiththomas7@gmail.com](mailto:keiththomas7@gmail.com)

Website: [www.groupbiblestudy.com](http://www.groupbiblestudy.com)