

Ministry of Grace

Lesson 6 – Giving God a Little Help

Genesis 16:1-16

¹Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. She had a female Egyptian servant whose name was Hagar. ²And 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.

³So, 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. ⁴And he went in to Hagar, and she conceived. And when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress.

⁵And 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!"

⁶But 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.

⁷The angel of the LORD found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur. ⁸And 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."

She said, "I am fleeing from the presence of my mistress Sarai."

⁹The angel of the LORD said to her, "Return to your mistress and submit to her." ¹⁰The angel of the LORD also said to her, "I will surely multiply your offspring so that they cannot be numbered for multitude."

¹¹And 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. ¹²He 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."

¹³So 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." ¹⁴Therefore the well was called Beer-lahai-roi; it lies between Kadesh and Bered.

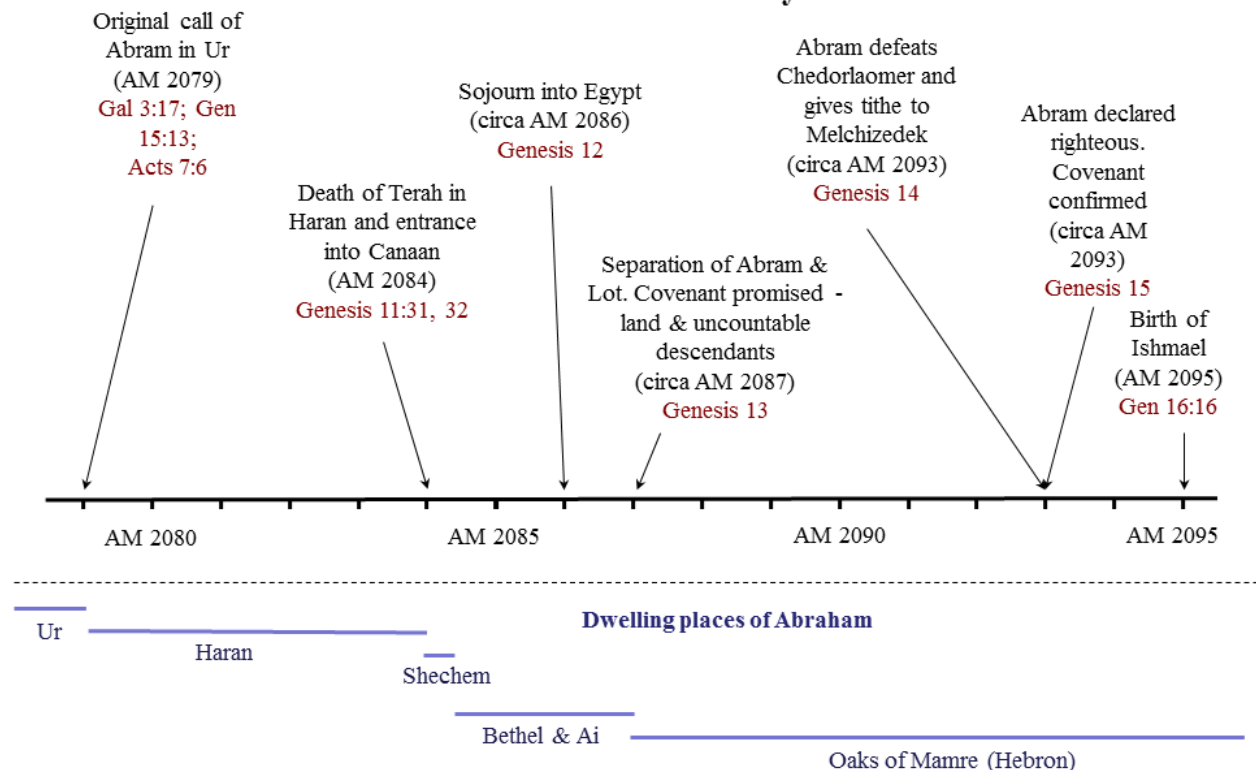
¹⁵And Hagar bore Abram a son, and Abram called the name of his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. ¹⁶Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram.

Synopsis

It's now been ten years since Abram arrived in the land that God had promised to him, about seven years since Yahweh told him that his descendants would be uncountable, and about a year since God told Abram that the Messiah would be his offspring. Abram and Sarai are living near the Oak Grove of Mamre, which will later be named Hebron, and Abram still has no children. In an act of unselfish love (but weakness of faith), Sarai suggests to Abram that he should have sexual relations with her handmaid, Hagar, so that he might have the son he so earnestly craves. Now, to our modern western mind, this might seem a bit bizarre. However, in the time and the society that they were living it was not so unusual. It was perfectly normal for a barren woman to give her handmaid to her husband in order to produce offspring.

Apparently their plan worked, for Hagar conceived and was going to give Abram the child he desired. However, as we will see, this caused no small amount of contention between Sarai and Hagar. It got so bad that Hagar ran away, but Yahweh was there to meet her in her time of need. He instructed her to return and he promised her that her descendants would be too many to number. Then, showing the strength of her faith in the God who lives and sees, in obedience she returned to Abram and Sarai at the Oak Grove of Mamre.

Timeline of Abraham's Early Years



*Dates are approximate from the year of creation (AM) based on the ages given in the Masoretic Text of the Old Testament.

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Figure 1 - Abraham's early years

Genesis 16:1, 2

Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. She had a female Egyptian servant whose name was Hagar. 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.

“Sarai ... had borne him no children” – It had been said of her that she was barren (**Genesis 11:30**). Sarai was an exceedingly beautiful woman, she and Abram were chosen of God for a great work, they have great wealth, they have been following God’s leading, and they have been promised that the Messiah would descend from them. Despite all these indications of blessing from God, they have had no children. They both wanted children more than anything.

“female Egyptian servant whose name was Hagar” – Hagar, Hebrew *hāgār* means “flight.” It is possible that Hagar was among those given to Abram by Pharaoh when they left Egypt approximately eight years earlier:

And for her sake he dealt well with Abram; and he had sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male servants, **female servants**, female donkeys, and camels. (**Genesis 12:16**)

According to Jewish tradition, Hagar was a daughter of Pharaoh (by a lesser wife) who, when he saw the wonders done by God in protecting Sarai, said, “It is better that my daughter should be a handmaid in this house than a mistress in another.”

“Sarai said to Abram” – This plan was initiated by Sarai.

“the LORD has prevented me from bearing children” – Notice that it is possible to know how the Lord works and still **not** have faith that He **will** work as He has promised. Sarai and Abram both believed that God was the one who had caused Sarai to be barren. They had both seen God work miracles in their lives in the past. They both were aware of God’s promise to bring forth the Messiah from Abram. And yet ... they both demonstrated a lack of faith that God would do what He had promised.

“it may be that I shall obtain children by her” – Literally, “perhaps I may be built up from her.” It was a legal custom of that day that a barren woman could give her maid to her husband as a wife, and the child born of that union was regarded as the first wife’s child. If the husband then said to the slave-wife’s son, “You are my son,” then he was the adopted son and heir. So Sarai’s suggestion was unobjectionable according to the customs of that time, but as Paul tells us in the fourteenth chapter of Romans:

But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. **For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.** (**Romans 14:23**)

We aren’t told exactly what Sarai’s motives were, but it appears that she was doing this with good intentions as an act of love and submission to Abram.

“And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai” – We are also not told the specifics of Abram’s thinking as to why he agreed to go along with Sarai’s plan, but he did!

Genesis 16:3, 4

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. And he went in to Hagar, and she conceived. And when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress.

“after Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan” – It has been ten years since they arrived in Canaan. Abram is now eighty-five years old and Sarai is seventy-five.

“Sarai ... took Hagar ... and gave her to Abram her husband as a wife” – There is nothing covert about this. Sarai willingly offered Hagar to Abram for the sole purpose of producing offspring. Neither one of them saw anything wrong with this action.

“she looked with contempt on her mistress” – Literally, “her mistress became little in her eyes.” Once Hagar realized she had conceived, her pride caused her to belittle Sarai.

Genesis 16:5, 6

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!" 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.

“May the wrong done to me be on you!” – Even though the idea appears to have been Sarai’s initially, she now blames Abram for the way things turned out.

“May the LORD judge between you and me” – Sarai feels deeply wronged and takes no responsibility for what has happened. Therefore, she is willing to stand before the all-knowing Judge of the earth to plead her own innocence and Abram’s guilt.

“your servant is in your power; do to her as you please” – Refusing to accept blame for what has happened, Abram shirks his responsibility as the patriarch of the family. Instead of handling the matter in a godly manner, he instructs Sarai to take care of the problem.

“Sarai dealt harshly with her” – Following her husband’s lead, Sarai lets her sin nature control her actions and decides to “punish” Hagar for her haughty attitude.

“she fled” – Hagar, acting just as self-righteous as Abram and Sarai, decided to run away instead of humbling herself before Sarai.



Figure 2 - The Well (Be'er Lahai Roi)

Genesis 16:7-10

The angel of the LORD found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur. 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." The angel of the LORD said to her, "Return to your mistress and submit to her." The angel of the LORD also said to her, "I will surely multiply your offspring so that they cannot be numbered for multitude."

“the Angel of the LORD” – God in the person of Jesus Christ pre-incarnate. This is the first mention of an angel in the Bible and the first mention of the Angel of the LORD. As evidence of His omniscience, He addressed her as “Hagar, Sarai’s maid.”

“the way to Shur” – This was the main route from Hebron to Egypt through the Wilderness of Shur. It is the same route that Abram would have travelled when he journeyed into Egypt. Since it is possible that Hagar was acquired when Abram was in Egypt, it is the route that she would now take to return home. The trip from Hebron to Egypt is not one that was embarked on frivolously. It is fraught with danger both of nature and mankind. As a single woman, Hagar was exposing herself to all the dangers of such a trip. Under normal circumstances it would not have been likely for her to have made it safely to Egypt.

“where have you come from, and where are you going?” – Obviously, our all-knowing God did not ask the question to gain knowledge for himself. This is God’s way of making us take stock of our situation.

“Return to your mistress, and submit to her” – In order to break the chain of self-righteous buck-passing (Sarai, then Abram, then Hagar), God instructs Hagar to return to Abram and Sarai and to be an example of obedient, faithful submission.

Genesis 16:11, 12

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. 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."

“you are pregnant and shall bear a son” – Once again demonstrating His omniscience, the Angel of the LORD tells Hagar to name her son Ishmael, meaning “God (the powerful one) hears.”

“wild donkey of a man” – Hebrew *pereh* (a wild, untamable desert donkey, called an onager), *adam* (man). The description given here is a picture of the nomadic tribes who roam the desert lands.

“dwell over against all his kinsmen” – The description is of one who does not have his own place, residing in the midst of others. This, again, is an apt description of the nomadic Arab tribes. Later in Genesis chapter 37, Joseph’s brothers sell him to the nomadic Ishmaelites (descendants of Ishmael).

And looking up they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, with their camels bearing gum, balm, and myrrh, on their way to carry it down to Egypt. Then Judah said to his brothers, "What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and let not our hand be upon him, for he is our brother, our own flesh." And his brothers listened to him. (*Genesis 37:25-27*)

Genesis 16:13, 14

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." Therefore the well was called Beer-lahai-roi; it lies between Kadesh and Bered.

“a God of seeing” – Hebrew *el-roi*, “God sees.”

“here I have seen him who looks after me” – Literally, “Have I also seen here after seeing?” This question indicates that Hagar had been taught that no one can see God and live. In effect, what she is saying is, “am I still alive after seeing God?” This question also indicates that she knew that it was God who was speaking to her.

“Beer-lahai-roi” – This could mean “well of the seeing alive” (she saw God and lived) or “well of the living one who sees.” Nowhere else in the five books of Moses is God called “the living one.” This expression is found in other OT books but only when used in contrast to dead idols who cannot see. Since this occurrence does not contain a reference to idols, it is most reasonable to translate *Be'er Lahai Roi* as “well of seeing alive” or “well of seeing and living.”

Genesis 16:15, 16

And Hagar bore Abram a son, and Abram called the name of his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram.

“Abram called the name of his son ... Ishmael” – It is evident that Hagar shared her experience with Abram and Sarai when she returned, including God’s naming of the son she was going to have.

There were six people in the Old Testament who were given names by God before their birth. They are: Ishmael (*Genesis 16:11*), Isaac (*Genesis 17:19*), Moses (*Exodus 2:10*), Solomon (*2 Samuel 12:24*), Josiah (*1 Kings 13:2*), and Immanuel (*Isaiah 7:14*). There were also two in the New Testament: Jesus (*Matthew 1:21, Luke 1:31*), John the Baptist (*Luke 1:13*)

So What?

Faith Equals Righteousness

In Lesson 4 ([Genesis chapter 14](#)) we saw God rewarding Abram for his faithful pursuit and defeat of Chedorlaomer with his invading army from the east. After God promised him an exceedingly great reward, Abram pointed out to God that it wasn't riches he wanted, but a son. After all, in [Genesis 12:2](#) God had promised Abram that He would make him a great nation, which would be impossible without having children. God then took him outside and had him recount the story contained in the stars. The climax of that story is that a redeemer, the Messiah, would come and save fallen mankind. Upon Abram's recounting the story, God said "So shall your seed be" ([Genesis 15:5](#)); that is, the Messiah will come from your body. In the following verse we are told that Abram believed God and, as a result of Abram's faith, God credited it to him as righteousness.

In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul goes to great lengths to convince the church in Rome that Abraham was not justified by works, but by faith. He then quotes Genesis chapter fifteen and says:

For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness." Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness, ([Romans 4:3-5](#))

In other words, the moment that Abram believed God regarding the Messiah being one of his descendants, God pronounced him as righteous; that's the moment he got saved. We are saved the same exact way - by believing God's word. In our case our belief is not in a future, coming Messiah but in a crucified and risen Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God, who shed His blood to pay the penalty for our sins.

When God pronounces us as righteous, in His record book we are as sinless as Jesus Christ. Now, that doesn't mean that we no longer sin, just that when we do sin, it is covered by the blood of the Lamb of God and cast away from us as far as the east is from the west and God remembers it no more. But, as long as we are alive on this earth, we will continue to sin because we have a sin nature. Here's how the Apostle John said it in the book of 1John:

If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ([1 John 1:8](#))

In spite of our sinful actions, once we are saved God sees us as righteous and sinless. Whether you feel like it or not, in God's eyes you are as righteous as Christ! Now, let's see what happened to Abram after God declared him righteous.

Another "Brilliant Idea" Gone Wrong

It has only been a little more than a year since God told Abram that the Messiah would be his seed. And yet, he and Sarai still have no children. Apparently Sarai has been thinking about it as well, a lot! She realized that God had prevented her from having children, so she came to the conclusion that the only way she was going to have children was to find a surrogate. As much as it may have pained her to think about her beloved husband in the arms of another woman, she

decided that having a child was more important to her than her jealousy. So she finally suggested her idea 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. (Genesis 16:2)

Was she being selfish? The truthful answer is, “Yes!”

The surprising thing about her idea is that Abram agreed! Was he being selfish? After all, they both knew that it was God’s will for Abram to have children. But was it God’s way?

Have you ever prayed about a need and then decided to help God? I am reminded of the story about a couple who needed a new washing machine. They decided to pray about it and trust in God. Then, after a short amount of time they saw a washing machine on sale and decided to purchase it by charging it on their credit card. Was that faith?

And, what about Moses? At Rephidim there was no water for the children of Israel or their animals, so God told him to strike the rock with his rod (Exodus chapter 17). When he did so, water gushed out. Then, nearly forty years later they arrived at Kadesh and once again there was no water for the people (see Numbers chapter 20). This time God told Moses to speak to the rock, but that’s not what he did, is it? Instead of speaking to the rock, Moses once again struck the rock. Imagine his surprise when no water came out. So, he struck the rock again. This time water came forth from the rock. But, because he did not do it God’s way, he was banned from entering the Promised Land.

But, wait a minute. Didn’t the people need water? Didn’t Moses provide them with water? Well, no, actually Moses didn’t provide the water, God did. But, didn’t Moses do a good deed? Yes, but he did it in a wrong way. That’s not faith, that’s works.

Let’s look at another example. When David became king, he purposed in his heart to bring the Ark of the Covenant back to the City of David, so they put the Ark on a brand new cart and began the journey. However, when one of the oxen stumbled, Uzzah reached up to steady the Ark and God struck him dead. Wait a minute! Wasn’t David doing a good thing? Wasn’t Uzzah doing a good thing in trying to protect the Ark? Yes, they were both doing good things, but they weren’t doing them God’s way. God had said that the Levites were to carry the Ark wherever it went. David and Uzzah were both doing a good work, but they weren’t doing it God’s way. It was not of faith, it was works.

In his letter to the Christians at Rome, the Apostle Paul warned them not to argue about petty things. Some people believed that one day of the week was more important than the others. Other people believed that some food was good and that other food should be avoided. Paul said “hogwash” (that’s a rough translation). He said, it’s not what you do, but how you do it. Here’s how he said it:

The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God, while the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord and gives thanks to God. (Romans 14:6)

The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves. But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. **For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin.** (Romans 14:22, 23)

Did you get that? It doesn't matter what we do, we should do it by faith and as unto the Lord; in other words, include God in everything you do. If we are walking with Him and we are living for Him, if we do everything as if He were right there with us, doing it His way and for His sake, then we will be pleasing to Him. Remember what the writer of Hebrews said?

And without faith it is impossible to please him ,, (Hebrews 11:6a)

Abram believed God's promise of a Messiah and he was declared as righteous. But after that, Abram and Sarai tried to "help" God. They were not acting out of faith. Not only did Sarai demonstrate a lack of faith by making this suggestion, but Abram also demonstrated a lack of faith in going along with it. And, even though their plan produced offspring for Abram, it was not according to Yahweh's plan, and it caused problems that exist until the present day.

Well, what about Hagar? When things got tough she ran away. She was the worst of the lot wasn't she? Or was she? Even though she let her pride come between her and Sarai, even though she ran away because she was punished for her actions, she eventually faced God. Not only did she see God, she knew that God saw her. Most of the world today tries to hide from God or deny that He even exists. One day, when it's too late, they will see God in all His glory and know their own sinfulness. Because they have hidden from God, He will send them away from His presence, forever, but not Hagar! She saw God and saw herself as He saw her. She stopped running and humbled herself before Him. Having humbled herself, she recognized, perhaps for the first time, who this God is that Abram has been talking about all these years. He was no longer Abram's God, He was her God and she was His child.

When God told her to return to Sarai, to submit to the woman who had mistreated her so, she did. She returned and humbled herself before Sarai just as she had humbled herself before God. As a result, God fulfilled His promise to her; she had a son who became the father of the Arab people. And, you know what? She taught Abram and Sarai a lesson about faith and submission. She was a witness to them and an example of how to behave after having done wrong. So I ask you, was Hagar's faith the result of obedience, or was her obedience the result of faith?

And, did Abram learn his lesson? Well, it took another fifteen years before Abram and Sarai had their promised son, and he was born of Sarai – and they gave God the glory.

How about you? Are you wondering why God hasn't been answering your prayers? Does it seem like He's not listening to you? The real question is not whether God is listening to you – the real question is, are you listening to God? Are you spending quality time with Him each day? Are you trusting in Him to take care of you? Are you doing what He wants you to do, and doing it His way?

Is your daily walk with God by faith, or is it by works?

Remember, without faith it is impossible to please Him!

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