

GENESIS

16:1-16

Genesis 16:1-16

Taught by Simeon Forder on Sunday morning, 5th November 2023 @ Deal Christian Fellowship

Reading: Genesis 16:1-16

Introduction

This morning we are going to study chapter 16 of Genesis — the shortest chapter of this book so far, and in fact, the shortest chapter of the 50 chapters that make up this first book of the Bible. However, make no mistake — this chapter is rich in content. *If* we listen, we'll learn much from it.

The question is, will you? Will you listen? Have you come today with open hearts? I hope and pray you have. I really hope that your intent for the next 30-40 minutes is not to simply pass the time. I hope that you will listen to what is in *this* book, not another book, nor Facebook. For nothing will guide you better in life than the Word of God.

But furthermore, you (and I) need to *apply* what we read, and what we hear from it. And that means it can't only enter our heads and hearts, but it must affect our hands and our plans. It should change how we live, what we do. James warns in his letter:

James 1:22-25

But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was. But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does.

When someone asks you after the service (and I hope they do) “what was the sermon about this morning” your answer isn’t “I haven’t got a clue what Sim said this morning”. That’s not because I want you to listen to me per se, but I want you to listen to what the Bible has to say. And more than that, as we’ve just read, I want you to apply this to your life. And I need to apply it to mine.

Let me ask you a question — and yes, you can put your hands up for this. Who wants to be blessed in what you do? I’m assuming you all do, right?! Well, what James is saying here is that for that to happen, you need to continue in the Word. To be a doer, as well as a hearer of it.

With that said, as we start this chapter, it’s worth reminding ourselves that all we see recorded in the Bible is written for our example. However, that’s not always an example to follow, but rather, sometimes it is an example to avoid. Indeed, isn’t it easier to learn from other people’s mistakes?

And in this chapter we’ll see a consequence of Abram’s earlier decision (at the end of chapter 12), to go to Egypt of his own accord. And we’ll also see Sarai react to her *current* situation in a way that we indeed should not follow. In both cases, the issue was taking matters into their own hands.

While you and I may not face the exact same scenario’s as Abram and Sarai — we will certainly face the same choice, and that is; do we trust God and His provision (even if that means we *don’t* get something we want), or will we take matters into our own hands? — either to get something we shouldn’t, or get something good, but through illegitimate means (where our impatience means we don’t trust God’s *timing*).

Each of us will need to make that choice many times over throughout our lives. I am as sure as can be that some (if not all) of us will face that choice *this week*.

Overview of chapter sixteen

So what will we read about in this chapter? Well, there’s no need for a spoiler alert as we’ve already read through it together this morning. But here’s one way we can break it down.

Overview of chapter sixteen

- **v1** — Sarai’s struggle, and opportunity
- **v2-4** — Sarai’s decision, and consequences
- **v5-13** — Hagar is poorly treated, but God sees
- **v14-16** — Hagar obeys, and gives birth to Ishmael

In the first 5 verses we'll look at the difficulty of Sarai's situation, the opportunity she sees, and that choice she ultimately makes (along with Abram). But we'll quickly see consequences to that choice. Reacting again to her new situation (in verses 5-13), we'll see Sarai treat Hagar (her maid) poorly, leading Hagar to flee — but God, who sees every trial we go through — also saw Hagar's trial, and comforts her, guides her, and (we'll see in verses 14-16) that He blesses her with a son.

In some ways, Abram's actions — given the great faith we read of in the prior chapter — are somewhat of a disappointment to read, yet isn't that very real and honest? I hope that we all, as we look at his life, recognise the mistakes we've made, or are even making, but knowing that like Abram, we can and should always return to the Lord, to walk with Him again — for it is better that we humble ourselves and do that, rather than find that He humbles us.

Chapter sixteen

Let's look at the detail then, starting at verse 1 of course:

Genesis 16:1

Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. And she had an Egyptian maidservant whose name was Hagar.

In this we see both Sarai's situation, and her opportunity.

Her situation was being childless, one of at least seven women the Bible specifically records as being barren. It doesn't appear intimacy was the issue, but rather fertility. We don't know why. And neither did Sarai. And that's an *extremely* hard place to be. To want children, to be in a position to have them, but for whatever reason, you can't get pregnant (or even past those first few nervous weeks). Even with the best consultants available today, it can still sometimes remain unknown why any given couple can't have children.

And we should not minimise the anguish Sarai would have felt here. Siân and I know just a little of this — we know that a year can feel like a very, very long time (I'm sure some of you know that too)— but Sarai had wrestled with this for *much* longer, and still remained childless. And no doubt the promise that God had given Abram played on her mind. Abram was now 86, she was 76. And they had not received the child, the heir, that God had promised to Abram.

So what to do? Had God's promise failed? Had He lied? I don't think Sarai necessarily believed that, but, rather her impatience overtook her reliance on God, when the reality was that God was neither procrastinating, or preoccupied. But rather He was preparing them. His timing was and is perfect. For certainly we'll see greater tests of faith would follow than this.

But in her weakness of faith at this moment, rather than turn to the Lord who had promised an heir, she looks at the opportunity before her. And that opportunity was her maid, Hagar. Where had Hagar come from? Well, we read right here, that she was an Egyptian. That is, the two things Abram brought back from Egypt — wealth and servants — would both cause him trouble. And as I've noted before, Egypt is always symbolic of the world.

Genesis 16:2

So Sarai said to Abram, "See now, the LORD has restrained me from bearing children. Please, go in to my maid; perhaps I shall obtain children by her." And Abram heeded the voice of Sarai.

Sarai assumed God was responsible, and she may have been correct in that. But it seems she was assuming that He was wrong, or unfair in doing so. And how we can do the same. We say or think "God, it's not fair that you've blessed my friends with a spouse and children while I'm sat here alone or childless!" But God is not unfair. While we don't always understand all that He is doing, especially in the moment, we are not to take matters into our own hands. But unfortunately that's what Sarai does here, and makes this suggestion to Abram. Rather than trusting God to provide, she goes to Hagar — symbolic of the world.

And this is such a contrast to Hannah, whom we later read of in 1 Samuel, who was also barren. In her case, she was distraught at her barrenness, her infertility. She was taunted by another woman, and even her husband didn't grasp how distressing this was for her. Yet, she went to the house of the Lord and prayed. She prayed her heart out, weeping as she did. And after talking to Eli the priest, we find she returned to her husband and, along with him, worshipped the Lord — *before* she even conceived. But here, Sarai did none of that — rather than go to the Lord, she resorted to her own understanding, and went to the world.

This may not be the *struggle* you face, but it's the same *choice* you face. Maybe *your* struggle is wanting to find a husband or wife. And in that, you can either trust the Lord that He will either provide, or in His sovereign grace does not provide because He knows that is better for you. *Or*, you can take matters into your own hands and date and marry a non-Christian against His will. "Oh, but I just want to be happy!" I know. I really know that. Singleness is a road I walked for over 15 years as an adult. But we can't assume happiness will be found in taking matters into our own hands — Sarai is our example in that, for this will not work out well for her and Abram.

Maybe *your* struggle is in employment — you want or even need a job to pay the bills. In that moment, it's possible to apply for or take *any* job, when in fact there are jobs that would cause you to compromise in your walk with God, or commitment to serving Him. "But I need to pay my mortgage" or "put fuel in my car" or "put food on the table". I know. I've been there. And those are genuine needs. But as with Sarai, the choice is whether you honour God and rely on Him, or rely on your own understanding.

Sarai's choice here, was to take the her maidservant, Hagar, and offer her to Abram as his wife, that she might bare a child that *Sarai* could call her own. This wasn't an uncommon practice at the time. Indeed, we later see that in Genesis 29 & 30 with Leah and Rachel, Jacob's wives, offering their maidservants to him. But it was not something God commanded, or even suggested. It was her own endeavour. Indeed, not once did God instruct polygamy.

Again, we must not minimise the anguish she must have felt in her infertility. But anguish, sadness, or any kind of distress are not reason to act contrary to God's will. So let's consider infertility for a moment — for even if we are untouched by it ourselves, we are likely to know of those who are.

The question many will ask is *why* am I infertile? Medically, we don't always know. But since God is the giver of life, do we assume, like Sarai did, that God is withholding his blessing? Well, if we trust that God really is good, and that He is sovereign, then it may well be that He doesn't give us what we ask, because He knows that we are far better off without it — whether for a season, or at all.

But what we can't assume is that infertility — in ourselves or others — is the result of some sort of sin. Just look at what we read in Luke chapter 1:

Luke 1:5-7

There was in the days of Herod, the king of Judea, a certain priest named Zacharias, of the division of Abijah. His wife was of the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. And they were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless. But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both well advanced in years.

It's not that they were sinless, but that through the temporary covering of sacrifices, God saw them as blameless. Yet they were *still* childless. Infertility can be for many reasons, many of which are simply a result of living in a fallen world that is decaying, where health issues abound, despite the best efforts of medical professionals.

We may never know the exact reason why infertility affects us or any given couple, at least not this side of heaven. But what *is* in our control is how we respond to it, and what choices we make. And as with Sarai, there are choices that are laid out in front of couples in this situation by the world, as well as by medics, by family, and by friends.

What of those choices, though, are God-honouring and ethical?

I think it's a fair assumption that each one of us would condemn in the strongest possible terms *anyone* that stole another's baby. Yet that's not unheard of, even in this country. Indeed, there's a reason why maternity wards are secure units. This clearly is something a Christian should have no part in. But there are other, more socially acceptable choices. One of those is surrogacy. I think there are a multitude of difficulties with this, not least of which are the questions around honesty and openness to your child as they grow up. Especially if a donor sperm or egg are used.

But one choice that is far more prevalent and normalised in our society is IVF — an aided form of conception that has limited success in the sense of a child being born. There are those that would rule it out in all cases, and I'm not going to berate anyone for drawing the line there. But the issue particularly lies not in the child that is *born*, but what happens to the often multiple embryos that are conceived, but *discarded*. That is where I believe we must draw the line as Christians, that we make no decision that would result in the destruction of a precious embryo, for life begins at conception.

The difficulty that Christian couples face, if trying to pursue a more ethical approach of only creating one embryo at a time, is not funded by the NHS — where as the destruction of embryos is.

There are also other choices that are coming to the fore in recent years, though, as a worldly solution for the woman who is not married, not in a relationship, but desperate to have children — and that is the idea of a single woman having a sperm donor through one means or another, with the intent of raising their child single-handedly. Now let me say clearly, if you are a single mother through tragedy or through any choice not of your own, you have my sympathy and admiration — it is a very difficult thing to do. It is difficult enough raising one or more children as a *couple*. And as Christians, we must show love as Christians *should* to those in the midst of that great challenge.

However, to *intentionally* decide to raise a child alone is unbiblical, for it does away with the foundation of a father *and* mother that God instituted from the beginning. That doesn't solve the heartache of not finding someone whom you can marry and have children with, but don't be so foolish to take matters into your hands in this way, depriving a child of the father figure God designed them to have. This is not a popular stance, but it is the Biblical one. The irony is not lost on me, that the world pushes for every board room to have a 50/50 split of men and women, but if you suggest every home should have a mother and father, people lose their mind!

Let us neither take shortcuts, nor matters into our own hands in any regard, but seek the Lord, obey what He has *already* said in His Word, and follow His guiding in our own lives, honouring Him in all we do, following Jesus example, saying "not my will, but Thy will be done".

Now, I'm just touching on these things here, and there are far better and more detailed resources on this difficult and emotional topic, and I would start by pointing you to a book titled *Fearfully & wonderfully made* by Dr Megan Best, which Sian and I found of help a few years back.

Continuing here in verse 2, we see Abram listened to his wife. That's not a bad thing, guys. Our wives can often be smarter than us in decision making. However, in this case, Abram made a mistake. So how do we know *when* to listen?

Consider this: Abram had reason to trust his wife. Sarai had been with him since he left Ur, travelled with him to Haran, stayed there, and later moved to the land of Canaan, to Egypt, and back to Canaan. She was there when he went off to rescue Lot, and there to welcome him when he returned with his nephew. She, along with him, desired children. They had shared so much of life together. They were undoubtedly close to each other. But, and this is important, we *cannot* determine who we listen to on the basis of how close we are to them, or how much of our lives they have walked through with us. We must determine who we listen to, moment by moment, based on whether what they say is in line with the Bible.

So friends, even if your spouse, your best friend, your trusted acquaintance, your parents, your siblings, your family — whoever — if they tell you to do something that is contrary to the Bible, do not listen to them, do not take their advice. Sadly, in one of Abram's weaker moments, he followed the suggestion of Sarai, and there would be long term consequences. We read:

Genesis 16:3

Then Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar her maid, the Egyptian, and gave her to her husband Abram to be his wife, after Abram had dwelt ten years in the land of Canaan.

So Hagar became his wife, not merely his concubine. And we read that this occurred ten years after they had lived in Canaan — and I wonder, how long had this idea been playing on Sarai's mind? It's easy to imagine they had been trying for children for far more than 10 years. But in these *last* 10 years there was this Egyptian maid who had returned with them from Egypt. And so the thoughts began to grow in Sarai's heart, and the a lack of answer to what she wanted coupled with this potential opportunity, wore on her until she made her choice.

In this, we should be reminded that God will not allow us to be tempted beyond what we are able, but will provide a way out — if we only go to Him to help in our time of need. Here, we now see the consequence of Sarai not doing that:

Genesis 16:4

So he went in to Hagar, and she conceived. And when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress became despised in her eyes.

Sarai's plan worked! But now the problem starts (and it's not going to be limited to this chapter). Now Abram's wife, and pregnant, Hagar looks down on Sarai. Having what Sarai didn't or couldn't have, perhaps this is a look of pride from Hagar.

Genesis 16:5

Then Sarai said to Abram, "My wrong be upon you! I gave my maid into your embrace; and when she saw that she had conceived, I became despised in her eyes. The LORD judge between you and me."

So now Sarai realises that she has made a mistake, and her husband too. She can see the start of the consequences. Some suggest that she was even trying to place blame on Abram — as if to say "one of us should have stopped this from happening", the implication being that it should have been Abram, as head of his house. Whatever the case, her actions could not be undone.

We should take this as a warning, for there are decisions we can make in *our* lives that have long lasting consequences. Here, Sarai had followed a custom of the world, by giving her handmaid to her husband. And we must be oh so careful not to compromise for a minute, by also looking to the world's solutions to our problems. One of the dangers of our day, is that we are told that we have a right to be happy. A right to be married. A right to have children. A right to have a comfortable lifestyle. A right to a happy retirement.

But says who? We don't find that in the Bible. Yes, God does want us to be happy, but not at the cost of holiness. Not at the cost of our walk with Him, or the happiness of others. Jesus laid down His rights, will we lay down ours?

Now, beyond Sarai's decision to follow the world than go to God, there is also a greater issue. For in the decision that both Abram and Sarai were party to, they also failed to believe God. He had already *promised* Abram in chapter 12 that He would make Abram a great nation. And in chapter 15 He *made a covenant*, saying that Abram's descendants would be as impossible to count as the stars. Yet they failed to trust God before making this choice, and then failed to seek His help when dealing with the consequences. We find as we read on:

Genesis 16:6

So Abram said to Sarai, "Indeed your maid is in your hand; do to her as you please." And when Sarai dealt harshly with her, she fled from her presence.

Abram washes his hands of the situation, while Sarai, possibly because custom at the time prevented her from selling her maidservant on, resorts instead to making Hagar's life as miserable as possible. And here we see the start of some Middle East tensions that have bubbled away since.

Hagar was wrong to look down on Sarai, but now, unable to bear the situation she found herself in, she flees from her. But next, we read something significant:

Genesis 16:7

Now the Angel of the LORD found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, by the spring on the way to Shur.

We can easily gloss over this, but who was the Angel of the LORD? Well, as a rule of thumb, any time we see the mention of an angel appearing in the Bible — if the person worships them, they will *refuse* to be worshipped. Why? Because they know the glory must go to God. Yet, we'll see that this angel does no such thing. And so this is recognised as yet another Christophany, following on from that with Melchizedek in chapter 14 — that is, this is an old testament appearance of Jesus. As such, being God, He does not refuse to be worshipped. Furthermore, in verse 10 He speaks in the first person, saying "I will multiply your descendants". If this was a regular angel, he would have said "God will multiple your descendants".

We have a wonderful picture of our Saviour here. For it was *He* that found Hagar, not the other way around. Though indeed her attitude may have been wrong, it was He that sought her out in the midst of here trial. God is always the initiator. He is our good shepherd.

Genesis 16:8

And He said, "Hagar, Sarai's maid, where have you come from, and where are you going?" She said, "I am fleeing from the presence of my mistress Sarai."

He knew exactly *who* Hagar was. He knew exactly where she had come from, and where she was going. But He asks as if to say "What's the plan, Hagar?" But then says, "I've got a better one..."

Maybe you're here this morning and you've made a wrong turn. You're fleeing from a difficult situation too. Likewise, God's going to say "what's your plan? For I've got a better one for you too".

Next He says:

Genesis 16:9

The Angel of the LORD said to her, "Return to your mistress, and submit yourself under her hand."

In other words, get under her mission. While it may not be the easiest thing to do, it is the best thing to do. "Understand what she wants, where she's going. And be supportive of her. Help her however you can. Do not rub in her face in the fact you have a child. But neither hide from her."

This submissive attitude is one that we should each have too, whether at school, at work, or in any sphere of life. Peter exhorts in his first letter:

1 Peter 2:18-25

Servants, be submissive to your masters with all fear, not only to the good and gentle, but also to the harsh. For this is commendable, if because of conscience toward God one endures grief, suffering wrongfully. For what credit is it if, when you are beaten for your faults, you take it patiently? But when you do good and suffer, if you take it patiently, this is commendable before God. For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps: "Who committed no sin, Nor was deceit found in His mouth"; who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously; who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness—by whose stripes you were healed. For you were like sheep going astray, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

This is the example we are to follow also, considering Christ's example to us.

Genesis 16:10

Then the Angel of the LORD said to her, "I will multiply your descendants exceedingly, so that they shall not be counted for multitude."

God would bless her greatly in this regard, of course also honouring what He had promised Abram, even through Hagar's descendants.

Genesis 16:11

And the Angel of the LORD said to her: "Behold, you are with child, And you shall bear a son. You shall call his name Ishmael, Because the LORD has heard your affliction."

This is new information to her — there were no pregnancy scans or tests to know the baby's gender — and she learns that she will have a son. Furthermore, her son is one of the few individuals named before birth, along with Isaac, Solomon, John the Baptist and Jesus (plus a few others) — and she is told to call him Ishmael, meaning *whom God hears*.

Next, she is even told about his character:

Genesis 16:12

He shall be a wild man; His hand shall be against every man, And every man's hand against him. And he shall dwell in the presence of all his brethren."

We later find that Hagar and Ishmael are forced to flee the family, and Ishmael and his descendants live in the northern Arabian area, east of Egypt. And there is much suggestion given that the Arab nations descended from Ishmael, even Mohammed claiming his lineage went back to him.

However, the picture is more complex than that. While it is very likely some Arabs can trace their roots back to Ishmael, giving credence to these historical tensions, not all of them can, for there were others living in this area too. Of course, it's certainly provocative to say all Arabs are descendants of Ishmael, given that we read there would be this tension between others and him. However, one of the big proponents of this idea are Muslim's themselves, claiming that not only are they all descendants of Abraham through Ishmael, but that the promise given to inherit the land of Canaan was to them also, or even instead of Israel!

But we know that the promise was given through Isaac alone — not Ishmael, nor the other sons that Abraham would have with his third wife, Keturah.

In verse 13 we read Hagar's response to all this:

Genesis 16:13

Then she called the name of the LORD who spoke to her, You-Are-the-God-Who-Sees; for she said, "Have I also here seen Him who sees me?"

Again, this makes clear that the One Hagar saw was none other than God Himself — not merely an angel. And she describes God as the One who sees, for He was the One who found *her*. And indeed, He is still the God who sees. He sees the trial you're in. He sees when you are struggling with the hand you've been dealt, so to speak. Whether in absence of what you hope (like Sarai) or the presence of what you didn't hope for (like Hagar).

Whether you are desperately hoping for a spouse, a child, a job, or better health — God sees all that you are going through. Whether you are being persecuted, mocked, or despised — He sees it all. The question is, will you obey His every command?

Here, it is evident that Hagar did obey His instructions, for she returns to Abram, and submits to Sarai. Although that choice and her life would not be easy, she does what is best — for she does what God asks of her.

Genesis 16:14

Therefore the well was called Beer Lahai Roi; observe, it is between Kadesh and Bered.

The meaning of this name is "the well of living after seeing". In a sense, it is at this spring, this water in the wilderness, where she finds this living water — this trust and obedience in God Himself. And so she returns as God instructed, for we read in verse 15:

Genesis 16:15

So Hagar bore Abram a son; and Abram named his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael.

Clearly, Abram listened to all that Hagar had been through, especially this instruction from the Lord to call their son Ishmael. But all was not resolved. For Ishmael would always be the son that was born through Abram's own efforts, rather than by faith. And as such there would be such a contrast with his yet-to-be-born son, Isaac — not only would the promise pass only to him (and his descendants), but he would even be described by God Himself as Abram's *only* son. For the works of the flesh, of Abram's own efforts, were as nothing before God.

This chapter closes by giving us the timing of Ishmael's birth. We read:

Genesis 16:16

Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram.

That is, it wouldn't be for another 14 years until Isaac would be born. But in those 14 years we don't see Abram and Sarai take matters into their own hands again — at least, not in this regard. But we will see Abram fail in faith at least once more as we get to chapter 20 in a few weeks time.

Conclusion

This might be a short chapter, but it is not short on lessons we can and should learn from. The problem is, we are hard hearted, we are stubborn. And we want to do things our own way. But we can't do things our way and ask God to bless us. That's like going clay pigeon shooting, aiming where we want the clay pigeon to be, then hoping it will hit the bullet.

If we want God to bless us, we must be doing that in which He *can* bless us. And that means doing *His* will, not our own. Let us return to the verses from James chapter 1 that we read earlier:

James 1:22-25

But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was. But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does.

God wants your obedience. Remember, to obey is better than sacrifice. You cannot assume God will bless you because you sing loudly on a Sunday, or because the songs mean something to you. No, no. If you want God to bless you, you must walk in His ways. It may not be the easiest to do, but it will be the best choice you can make. Even if you don't get what you have your heart set on today.

Application question

This week, let me leave you with just one question:

- Are you trusting God, or taking matters into your own hands?

Don't be so foolish to say "I'm trusting God will bless me in the choices I'm making" as some sort of excuse to do what you want anyway. No. Rather, take your every hope, every desire, every struggle, to the Lord. Ask Him His will in the situation. Don't act rashly, but act in accordance with His Word, listening for His guidance in your life — which indeed, will never contradict what is in His Word.

For the audio recording of this Bible study, and for additional studies, please see the DCF web site:



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