

Learning from Our Poor Decisions

Learning from doing it my way – who hasn't done that!!!!

Last week we were in Genesis Chapter 15 when God again encountered Abram, this time through a vision, where God puts his finger on an underlying concern that was encroaching on Abram's thinking – I still have no son through whom your wonderful promises can come to pass – I don't understand.

This week, in Genesis Chapter 16, we encounter another issue stemming from the same underlying problem of a lack of offspring, which Abram and Sarai have clearly been speaking together about, but this time from Sarai's perspective. And what's more, they are now ten years into their stay in Canaan, and still, there is no heir-apparent to continue Abraham's line for posterity, and clearly, this was a severe testing of their faith in God's ability to bring his promises to pass.

There are three specific scenes within the story each of which brings its own insight into the heart and character of God from which Abram was intended to learn, and so can we.

As the story unfolds, **Scene 1** has Sarai musing on her shared concern with Abram that they as yet have no children of their own: *"The Lord has kept me from having children."* v2a. This is her summation of the situation. We do not know if this was simply her best guess, or if she had actual insight into the situation – however, she had a plan! – *"Go, sleep with my maidservant; perhaps I can build a family through her"* v2b.

While this sounds highly unsavoury to our ears, it was quite acceptable in the context of its time. What the plan required was Hagar's willingness to hand over the baby in a similar way to what a surrogate mother is expected to do. However, in her context, basically, as a slave, she had no say in the matter – she was the property of Abram and Sarai. But of course, that did not stop her having her own feelings and thoughts; she was, after all, a human being created in God's image. So, from the get-go, this was a plan that was fraught with dangers, because the initial players, Sarai and Abram, are about to become three with the addition of Hagar, Sarai's Egyptian maidservant, no doubt acquired during their stay in Egypt.

Abram agreed to what Sarai said.³ 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.⁴ He slept with Hagar, and she conceived. (Principle – if you sow seeds, you will likely get a harvest!!!)

Scene 2 – A pregnancy involves a massive shift in relationships because another life is being created, and that means a shift in focus and a raft of responsibilities that come with the event.

When she knew she was pregnant, she began to despise her mistress.

Gen 16:4b

As soon as Hagar realised that she was pregnant, her attitude to her mistress changed – she had achieved something Sarai could not, and in attitude and in action, began to look down on her mistress. She was seeing this as an opportunity to her own advantage, not Sarai's.

Sarai's reaction to this new situation, in context, is understandable –

⁵ 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.'

Gen 16:5

She complained to Abram blaming him for the situation, which certainly has an element of truth to it, but in reality, they were both equally at fault – Sarai was wanting to establish her own family through Hagar, and Abram saw it as a practical solution to a seemingly persistent problem – both are struggling with the delayed fulfilment of the promise.

Abram's reaction to Sarai's accusation was to push the situation back on Sarai, suggesting she deal with Hagar in whatever way she chooses since Hagar is her servant. Abram clearly still saw her as Sarai's servant, rather than as his wife.

⁶ 'Your slave is in your hands,' Abram said. 'Do with her whatever you think best.' Gen 16:6

Sarai's response was to mistreat Hagar, so Hagar in her pregnant state, runs away from Sarai to escape the misery of Sarai's aggrieved disapproval. Therefore, Sarai's plan to build her own family with Abram's agreement to go with the plan, has now completely collapsed because instead of having Hagar's child as her own, the child has gone with the mother and they are left childless again. Gen 16:6b

This is where **Scene 2** emerges, and the focus now comes on Hagar. Her strategy in escaping appears to have been to go back to her family in Egypt since she heads for Shur, which is on the main trade route to Egypt. And further, into this scenario steps a fourth player, the angel of the LORD, who begins a conversational interaction with Hagar.

The narrator pictures the angel of the Lord as seeking out Hagar in her distress. He identifies her as Sarai's servant and asks questions that seek a response.

⁷ The angel of the LORD found Hagar near a spring in the desert; it was the spring that is beside the road to Shur. ⁸ And he said, 'Hagar, slave of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going?' Gen 16:7-8

Principle – God knows our name, knows where we are, and wants us to voice our reasons for what we are doing, and what our plans are for the future – he wants to join the conversation.

Hagar's response to the angel's questioning: *'I'm running away from my mistress Sarai,' she answered.* Gen 16:8

The angel goes on to give her some specific instructions for her present situation, followed by some insights about her progeny, and some details about the son she is carrying, whom she was to name Ishmael.

⁹ Then the angel of the LORD told her, 'Go back to your mistress and submit to her.'¹⁰ The angel added, 'I will increase your descendants so much that they will be too numerous to count.'¹¹ 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.¹² 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 towards all his brothers. Gen 16:9-12

Hagar then realises she has heard the voice of God speaking to her and that God has seen her distress and heard her explanations, which he will revise for her on the basis of *his* explained purposes.

¹³ 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.'¹⁴ That is why the well was called Beer Lahai Roi; it is still there, between Kadesh and Bered. Gen 16:13-14

So she went back under Sarai's care. She is carrying Abram's son, so Hagar needs to be under Abram's protection and blessing. She and the child she is carrying have significance, and she is to name him Ishmael, which means 'God hears', and relates to the revelation that Hagar has received through the angel of the LORD.

Finally, Ishmael is born, becoming Abram's firstborn, and fifth player in this story:

¹⁵ So Hagar bore Abram a son, and Abram gave the name Ishmael to the son she had borne.

Gen 16:15

Ishmael takes his place among Abram's sons, who finally numbered eight, from his wife Sarah, and his concubines Hagar, and Keturah. However, Isaac held the special place as God's promised and ultimately, miraculous, son of Abram and Sarah, who would continue the covenantal line right through to the coming of the Messiah and the new covenant.

So, what are the lessons that Abram and Sarai were needing to learn?

- We are free to make decisions but not all our decisions are necessarily God's idea
- In our freedom to make decisions, we are also responsible for the outcomes
- God will still work through our poor decisions to achieve his purposes
- Every individual has significance because all are created in God's image

- Sometimes it requires God to speak to a third-person to get a plan back on His track
- Although Ishmael was not part of God's succession toward the Messiah, he still received a blessing because he was Abram's son and created in God's image.
- Even our poor decisions can end with a blessing through God's sovereign grace

For us: This is the same mistake that Adam and Eve made – unknowingly, they tried to make God's plan work their way, rather than wait for the wisdom that only God can give!!!