



DOES GOD HELP THOSE WHO HELP THEMSELVES?

SERIES: THE LIVES OF THE PATRIARCHS

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Genesis 16:1-16

Eighth Message

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Elie Wiesel, one of the greatest writers to emerge from the Holocaust, begins his personal memoirs with the surprising admission: "I never really knew my father. It hurts to admit that, but it would hurt him even more if I deluded myself. The truth is, I knew little of the man I loved most in the world, the man whose merest glance could stir me."¹

Confessions like this are more common than we might imagine. As a young boy I felt I was the apple of my father's eye. But, like Elie Wiesel, I have to say I never really knew my father. He was a quiet man, a silent man. As children, my sisters and I admired his skill as a surgeon, but we knew little of his inner life. I was thirteen before I learned that he had a sister. So rarely did he speak of his father, to this day I can't remember my grandfather's name.

My mother too kept her past shrouded in silence. Perhaps the pain of being adopted at the age of nine, by an opera singer who was interested in her merely for her musical skills, inhibited her. Now that my parents are near death, many of the hidden secrets of the past are coming out. It is more than any child would want to know. I am even more in awe of the God who found me in the midst of it all.

As Christians, we can delight in the fact that as far as our spiritual forefathers are concerned, God hides nothing from us about our spiritual heritage. Much of that history is painful. Some of it is even quite sordid, but this is exactly where the kingdom of God works.

We are resuming Abram's journey, just after God has revealed to him that his seed would rival the stars in number. When the patriarch hears the news of a son who would spring from his own loins, and gazes at the infinity of stars set against the night sky, faith is born in the deepest recesses of his heart. It is a faith which God "reckoned to him as righteousness." But, following years of waiting, no son has yet been born to Abram. The drone of everyday existence has almost extinguished the bright light of that one moment. Does the promise still hold true? Time is running out. What shall he do? Pray and wait, or take action?

This is a familiar test. One piece of advice that we often hear is that *God helps those who help themselves*. Does he? The answer from our text is a surprising yes, but not in the way we might think.

I. Helping God (Genesis 16:1-6)

A. The Divine Tension (16:1-4a)

Now Sarai, Abram's wife had borne him no children, and she had an Egyptian maid whose name was Hagar. So Sarai said to Abram, "Now behold, the LORD has prevented me from bearing children. Please go in

to my maid; perhaps I shall obtain children through her." And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai. And after Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Abram's wife Sarai took Hagar the Egyptian, her maid, and gave her to her husband Abram as his wife. And he went in to Hagar, and she conceived; (Gen 16:1-4a, NASB)

The story now turns from Abram to the matriarch, Sarai. Setting the stage, the narrator reveals two things about Sarai, two details that will drive this story: she is barren, and she has an Egyptian maid (perhaps acquired during their brief stay in Egypt). Here we have Sarai's first recorded speech in the Bible, words that reveal her bitter pain that God has prevented her from having children. In the previous chapter God promised Abram that his very own son would be his heir, but the years have gone by and Sarai's impatience is near breaking point.

Though Abram may be heir to the promise, Sarai has difficulty seeing herself in that blessed position. Ten long years have gone by since they first settled down in the land. What have they got to show for it? They have no son. The longer the delay, the greater the pain they sense, especially Sarai. Feeling pushed beyond what she can stand, she takes action. For the first time in the story she becomes the prime force behind what is about to happen. She offers Abram her maid.

B. Human Help to End the Tension

Before we rush to condemn Sarai's actions we need to empathize with her pain. Many today can identify with the pain of barrenness, but this was an especially severe condition in the ancient world. Wenham explains:

It was a serious matter for a man to be childless in the ancient world, for it left him without an heir. But it was even more calamitous for a woman: to have a great brood of children was the mark of success as a wife; to have none was ignominious failure. So throughout the ancient East polygamy was resorted to as a means of obviating childlessness. But wealthier wives preferred the practice of surrogate motherhood, whereby they allowed their husbands to 'go in to' their maids, a euphemism for sexual intercourse. 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.'²

No longer able to live with the conflict between the promise of God and her own barrenness, Sarai does what most women would have done in her day. She adopts the normal cultural practice of surrogate motherhood. Her plan is successful, and Hagar conceives right away. But though Sarai's actions were culturally acceptable, and they met with immediate success, the narrator gives several

clues to indicate that they demonstrated a glaring absence of faith.

First, notice that there is no mention of prayer in the text. Each of the patriarchs was forced to deal with the issue of barrenness to test whether they really believed in a God who said he would bring life from the dead. In each case, God's name is mentioned as the source of life. In Sarai's case, however, God is blamed (16:2). When Rachel demanded children from Jacob, he defensively retorted, "Am I in the place of God, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?" (30:2) But only in Rebekah's case does a patriarch actually pray to God for his wife. The text says, "Isaac prayed to the LORD on behalf of his wife, because she was barren; and the LORD answered him and Rebekah his wife conceived" (25:21). Here, however, Abram and Sarai offer no prayer to God.

Secondly, the story has ominous echoes of Genesis 3, the first temptation story. In both instances the wife takes the initiative of *speaking* (3:2, 16:2); in both texts the husband "*obeyed the voice of his wife*" (3:17, 16:2); and in both cases the same two verbs are used for the actions of the woman: "she *took*...and *gave* to her husband"(3:6, 16:3). *Déjà vu* all over again, as the saying goes.

From the patriarchs we learn that this will be a common temptation that we should expect with regard to our faith. At times it is difficult to wait on God to fulfill his promises, because our pain is so intense. The endless waiting can so intensify our yearnings that we feel pushed past the breaking point. That is when we are most vulnerable. We resort to culturally accepted norms to fulfill what God said he would do for us. We give in rather than waiting on God through persistent prayer and persevering faith.

As is the case in this story, this often involves our sexuality. Why does a young girl give up her virginity to a young man who makes no pledge of love to her? Why do so many believers have a hard time waiting for another believer for a marriage partner? Why do couples live together before marriage, and refuse to consider marriage until a pregnancy intervenes? I wonder whether such compromises are more an attempt to alleviate pain rather than seeking pleasure.

Though we may appear to be successful in the short run, the long-term consequences can be devastating, as Abram's story reveals.

C. New Family Tensions (16:4b-6)

and when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress was despised in her sight. And Sarai said to Abram, "May the wrong done me be upon you. I gave my maid into your arms; but when she saw that she had conceived, I was despised in her sight. May the LORD judge between you and me." But Abram said to Sarai, "Behold, your maid is in your power; do to her what is good in your sight." So Sarai treated her harshly, and she fled from her presence. (16:4b-6)

Sarai's plan is successful, but immediately after Hagar conceives, everyone is at odds within Abram's home. From the human point of view, it would seem that everyone has a right to proclaim and an injustice to complain about. Abram is caught in the middle of this minefield.

For her part, Sarai gave Hagar to Abram so that she might bear children. But, now that her maid is pregnant,

Sarai can feel Hagar's disdain. Hagar rubs salt in the open wound of Sarai's barrenness. In a tidal wave of emotion, Sarai voices her complaint (it is almost a curse) to Abram: "May the wrong done me be upon you!" "Wrong" (*chamas*) is a strong word that often denotes violence (Gen 6:11,13).

Shunning all responsibility, Abram simply removes himself from the conflict entirely: "She is your maid; do what is right in your own eyes." This is the all too familiar refrain, "What did I do? I just did what you asked. Now you're blaming me."

For her part, Hagar can't believe how she's being treated. Despite her loyal sacrifice to her mistress, she is subjected to terrible mistreatment. She is forced to flee for her own safety, while Abram denies her the legal protection to which a wife is entitled.

From God's perspective, everyone has been hurt. No one has exercised faith; everyone shares in the wrongdoing. Sarai was wrong to seize the initiative away from God so she could manipulate the outcome. In her cruel oppression of Hagar, she becomes even more culpable. Hagar was wrong to show disrespect to Sarai once she became pregnant. She knew how to give just the right "look" to her barren mistress, that look of proud superiority designed to cut deep into Sarai's open wounds.

Abram was wrong in his absolute passivity. Like Adam in the garden, he did nothing to lead his family spiritually. He did not pray over Sarai's condition, or seek God's wisdom concerning her suggestion. He determined God's will merely by circumstance and availability. He chose the path of least resistance. But, worst of all, when the consequences begin to come home, he avoids responsibility and refuses to confront either woman with her wrongdoing. He turns a blind eye to his own headship and allows one woman to abuse the other, until Hagar is forced to flee.

This is a typical male response — abdicating leadership instead of facing negative emotions. The results are disastrous. By the end of the scene, Sarai has lost her maid, Abram has lost his son, and Hagar has lost her home. Such are the painful consequences that result whenever we take the initiative away from God and try to fulfill his promises in our own strength. To this day we are still witnessing the ongoing tensions of this compromise being played out in the hostilities of the Middle East.

Does God help those who help themselves? Absolutely! He has to come to our rescue and intervene because of the mess we make when we help ourselves! This is the good news of our text. God knows exactly how to intervene to bring reconciliation amidst the emotional damage we leave in our wake. His method of reconciliation is to minister grace and healing to each one, privately and personally, blessing each party beyond their dreams. Then, once he has administered grace upon their wounds, each one is in a position to be responsible for the consequences of their sin.

This process takes a long time. It begins, first, with the most severely wounded party, Hagar, the outcast maid.

II. God's Help (Genesis 16:7-16)

A. Sought by an Angel (16:7-8)

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

Shur. And he said, "Hagar, Sarai's maid, where have you come from and where are you going?" And she said, "I am fleeing from the presence of my mistress Sarai." (16:7-8)

For the first time in the Bible the "*angel of the LORD*" appears. In his appearances (recorded some 58 times in the Hebrew Scriptures) the angel of the LORD usually takes the form of a man as a messenger of a wondrous revelation; but by the time the revelation is fully understood he has disappeared. At that very moment the recipient realizes that he or she has just been in the presence of God. The scene usually ends with the individual left alone, awe-struck in worship.

In this text, the narrator explicitly mentions this one's name (the angel of the LORD) four times before Hagar understands his identity. This accomplishes two things. It gives this glorious messenger a commanding presence in the text, and it makes us highly attentive to every word he says. How amazing, that the first rendezvous this angel has with a human being is with an Egyptian slave woman! To me, facts like these are convincing evidence of the divine inspiration of Scripture. This is not the kind of story that men would write in a patriarchal, nationalistic society if their purpose was to put their spiritual forefathers in the best light. But the story is typical of God's heart that longs to minister grace to all oppressed peoples regardless of sex, rank or nationality.

So the angel of the LORD searches out Hagar in the wilderness, along one of the more southerly routes from Canaan to Egypt. He finds her by a spring of water (mentioned twice for emphasis). This is symbolic of the life and fertility she is about to receive. For the first time in our story she is addressed directly by name: "Hagar, Sarai's maid, where have you come from and where are you going?" Just as God sought out Adam and Eve with questions, so he does Hagar. But, unlike Adam and Eve, her answers carry neither defensiveness nor blame. She is honest about her fears and forthright about her actions: "I am fleeing from the presence of my mistress Sarai."

With that direct answer, the angel blesses Hagar.

B. Blessed by the Angel (16:9-12)

Then the angel of the LORD said to her, "Return to your mistress, and submit yourself to her authority." (16:9)

The angel begins with a surprising command: "Go home and *submit* to your mistress." This is an amazing thought since, as Wenham explains, the word "'submit' comes from the same root as 'humiliate' (v 6) and 'oppress' (15:13). Hagar is being told to submit not just to her mistress' authority but to suffering at her hand. The reason for this surprising injunction begins to emerge in the subsequent promises."³ Hagar is stunned into silence.

The angel continues.

Moreover, the angel of the LORD said to her, "I will greatly multiply your descendants so that they shall be too many to count." (16:10)

Now Hagar learns there will be a relationship between her suffering and the multiplication of her descendants. Awed once more by what she hears, she cannot respond.

The glorious messenger speaks a third time, making the

general promise even more specific.

The angel of the LORD said to her further, "Behold, you are with child, And you shall bear a son; And you shall call his name Ishmael, Because the LORD has given heed to your affliction." (16:11)

The words, "Behold you are with child, and you shall bear a son," are familiar to us who are accustomed to singing Isaiah's oracle at Christmas (Isa 7:14; 9:6). But I wonder how many of us know that these words were first used by the angel announcing not the birth of Emmanuel but of Ishmael? Ishmael, the father of the Arab nations, was God's gift to an Egyptian maid. His name (which means "God has heard") would serve as a constant reminder to Hagar of God's grace answering her affliction. This was the day that God gave heed to the affliction, by the hand of a Jew, of an Egyptian maid.

It is very important to understand why God sends Hagar home. By having the slave woman and the boy return home, God is not only making Abram fulfill his responsibilities to her, he is also creating a mirror for him to see his future destiny. Abram's descendants will be slaves in Egypt, and by their affliction they too will multiply until they are a great nation. But God will hear their affliction, and when they are driven out of Egypt, he will send his angel to guide them in the wilderness to find miraculous wells of water. So it is very important for this boy to spend his early years in the home where he was conceived. The same thing results when we face up to the consequences of our choices. It not only makes us responsible, at times it gives us a deeper understanding into our own character and what we are to become.

So God hears Hagar's affliction and this boy will be blessed.

But there is more.

"And he will be a wild donkey of a man. His hand will be against everyone, And everyone's hand will be against him; And he will live to the east of all his brothers." (16:12)

Hardly encouraging words for an expectant mother. Each of these four poetic lines contains a note of discord, intensifying from untamed independence to universal conflict. First, Hagar learns that her son will be like a "wild ass" of a man. Wenham explains the meaning behind the symbol: "The 'wild ass' lives in the desert, looks more like a horse than a donkey, and is used in the Old Testament as a figure of an individualistic lifestyle untrammled by social convention" (Jer 2.24; Hos 8.9).⁴ We can only imagine what this boy's teenage years were like.

Then Hagar learns that this love of independence will escalate until he is at odds with everyone in the family. The final result is that he will be forced to live a transient life, settling on the outskirts of society. Wenham further comments: "'He shall dwell apart from his brothers' describes the Bedouin living on the fringes of a more permanent settlement. [The preposition] 'apart from,' 'opposite,' suggests the haughty, defiant attitude of Ishmael toward those caught up in a more conventional way of life" (cf. 25:18).⁵ Here is a son whose descendants will find that their passionate love for freedom makes them unwelcome at home. Though we might be filled with sorrow by such an announcement, Hagar is overcome with awe. The very

freedom she sought will be her son's portion one day, and though he will live as a hostile, he will thrive and become a great people.

C. Seen By the LORD (16:13-16)

Then she called the name of the LORD who spoke to her, "Thou art a God who sees"; for she said, "Have I even remained alive here after seeing Him?" Therefore the well was called Beer-lahai-roi; behold, it is between Kadesh and Bered. (Gen 16:13, 14)

At this point the identity of the messenger becomes clear. It is the LORD himself, in the form of a human messenger. Overcome with elation at the privilege of such a visit, Hagar gives God a title of honor, and sanctifies the well by naming it out of the context of her divine encounter.

Both names are derived from the theme of *sight* that is a key thread in our text. Hagar's troubles began when "she saw that she had conceived." That was when Sarai became "despised in her eyes." Then Abram allowed Sarai to do to her that which was "good in her eyes," which led to her abuse and flight. But there is a God who *sees* all this. Unlike us, he sees all sides, and is deeply moved by everyone's hurt. And seeing, he immediately cares and comes to our aid with the grace of life. So Hagar calls him *El-roi*, meaning, the "God who sees me." Then, amazed that she has lived through the encounter, she exclaims, literally, "Did not I go on *seeing* here after He *saw* me?"⁶

Hagar then names this well of life "Beer-lahai-roi," which means, "*well of the Living One who sees me.*"⁷ How personal and intimate all this is! Hagar is overwhelmed that the living God would search her out when she was lost in a desert; God humbly disguises himself lest he overwhelm her; and finally, God tenderly blesses her with a future beyond her dreams. The narrator wants his audience to never forget this encounter, so the early readers were to take due note of this well each time they traveled on the highway between Kadesh and Bered. Abram certainly took note of it. When Isaac was born, he lived there in full view of the memory of his half-brother Ishmael (Gen 24:62; 25:11).

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

Hagar's obedience is seen not only in the act of her return, but also in the fact that Abram names the child with the divinely given name. From this we can conclude that Hagar was eager to tell Abram the revelation she received in the divine encounter. In our culture she might have chosen abortion as a way to erase the memory of her abuse, but instead she chose life. She was able to do so because of the hope of life she received from an angel by a well of life. So the boy's name was to be a constant reminder of that life. Perhaps we ought to call our Crisis Pregnancy Centers Beer-lahai-roi, and the counselors angels.

But sadly, there is no mention of Sarai in the report of Ishmael's birth. "Three times the text says, 'Hagar gave birth to a son for Abram'...So although Sarai's scheme fi-

nally succeeded, she seems to have been shut out from enjoying its success."⁸

The story concludes with the report of Abram's age. As Wenham notes: "Eleven years have passed since his arrival in Canaan; another thirteen are to elapse before the promise of a son is renewed (17:1)."⁹ One wonders whether Sarai's hasty actions had the opposite effect of what she intended. In her pain she hungered to forward the divine purpose, but in reality she delayed it fourteen years. But the good news is that despite our wrong choices the God of grace will intervene to redeem. Thank God, that he helps those who help themselves.

Lest we think that these stories of the patriarchs are unique to them and are not to be part of our story, let me remind you of another messenger who met a woman seeking refuge in her loneliness by a well. It is no accident that this well was associated with Abram's grandson, Jacob. And the messenger, like this angel, disguised his identity lest he overwhelm her. But he did ask for a drink, and in the conversation that followed spoke to her about "living" water that he came to give. When she responded that she was eager to have this water, all he asked her to do was admit who she had become through her poor sexual choices.

The woman was amazed to meet someone who knew everything about her and yet still loved her enough to offer her living water. When we receive love like that it isn't hard to admit what we've done. And this she did, with such intensity that she left her water pot by the well and ran into town and told everyone everything. In the end she discovered not only the identity of the messenger, but the blessing that he came to give. This lonely woman who sought refuge by a well would go on to spiritually give birth to an entire city. "And from that city many of the Samaritans believed in Him because of the word of the woman who testified, 'He told me all the things that I have done'" (John 4:39).

O the blessed work of the Angel of the LORD!

1. Elie Wiesel, *All Rivers Run to the Sea, Memoirs*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 3.
2. Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*. Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, Texas: Word, 1994) 7. For an example of such a case in ANE law codes see Nahum M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis* (New York: Schocken, 1966), 128.
3. Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 10.
4. Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 11.
5. Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 11.
6. Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), 71.
7. Alter, *Genesis*, 71.
8. Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 11.
9. Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, 11.

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