**THE LIFE OF ABRAHAM**

**WAITING FOR GOD’S PROMISES**

**Genesis 16**

**INTRODUCTION**

When I was a relatively new Christian, one of the most significant books I read was Donald Whitney’s *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*. The book was a key part in my early spiritual growth as it taught me how to intentionally build habits into my life that would help me grow closer to God. Habits like Bible reading and memorization, prayer, fasting, and even solitude.

That book gave me a hunger to learn more about the spiritual disciplines, so it wasn’t long until I read Kent Hughes’ book *The Disciplines of a Godly Man*, Richard Foster’s *Celebration of Discipline*, and John Piper’s book on Fasting called *A Hunger for God*. These are rich resources that gave me much benefit. But as I reflect back on those times, I realize now that there was one spiritual discipline that I desperately needed and continue to need that none of those books addressed, and it’s this: the discipline of waiting.

I must confess that waiting is hard for me, just like it must be for many of you, because we live in a culture of instant gratification. It pains me to wait for my food to cook in the oven. So what does our culture give me? The instant pot. I don’t like waiting next week for the new episode of my favourite show. So what do I get? Netflix. It takes so much time to research the answers to the questions we have, so no longer do I have to go to the library, find relevant books, read them, and research. Now I just have to ask Google.

We live in a culture where we expect things to come to us instantly, and so it’s no surprise that we bring these same expectations to God. We expect instant answers to our prayers. We expect instant guidance when we’re lost, instant provision when we’re in need, instant joy when we’re sad, but that’s not how God works. God calls us to *wait*.

Psalm 130:5-6:

“I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I hope; my soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen for the morning, more than watchmen for the morning.”

Psalm 40:1:

“I waited patiently for the LORD; he inclined to me and heard my cry.”

James 5:7:

“Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it, until it receives the early and the late rains.”

That’s how God fulfills his promises. God’s promises don’t cook in an instant pot so that they’re ready for us within minutes. They grow like crops in the ground. Slowly, yes, but surely. Days can pass without any tangible growth. If you stare at a seed in the ground for thirty minutes, or an hour, or even a day, it’ll feel like an eternity with little to show for it. But if you wait patiently, you’ll find that one day, that seed will have fully grown without you even noticing.

That’s what our text today is about. It’s about the importance of waiting on the Lord to fulfill his promises. And the way it teaches us that lesson is by showing us the consequences of *not* waiting. Abram and Sarai are going to fail yet again to walk by faith. They’re going to fail to trust in God and to wait on the Lord’s perfect timing by seizing control of the situation themselves. But the good news for all of us is that their failures don’t derail God’s plans. Far from it. Instead, the Lord will use their failures to show the beauty and comfort of his amazing, unending grace.

The title of this sermon is **Waiting for God’s Promises**. My aim today is to show you that **The Weaker Our Love for God, the Weaker Our Waiting on God.**

We will have three points today:

1. Sarai’s Anger
2. Abram’s Passivity
3. Hagar’s Hope

(1) **SARAI’S ANGER**

Verse 1 tells us who and what Chapter 16 is about. It’s about Sarai, Abram’s wife, and the fact that she still had no children. As we saw in Chapter 15, Abram was content to wait for a child, because he believed the Lord’s promises, a belief that was counted to him as righteousness, but as we’ll see, Sarai didn’t feel the same way. Verse 3 tells us that it had been ten years since God had first given Abram and Sarai the promises in Chapter 12 that they would be blessed, that they would multiply, and that they would become a great nation. But after all that time, Sarai had failed to produce a single child.

Her response to this is captured in verse 2. She tells her husband, “Behold now, the LORD has prevented me from bearing children.” Sarai’s not just stating a fact here. She’s not just telling Abram the obvious reality that she was unable to have children. She’s expressing her anger towards God. She’s saying, “God has done this to me. He’s the one to blame. God promised us a child, and that’s all I want, but *he* has prevented that from happening.”

And so, Sarai decides to take matters into her own hands in verse 2. She tells Abram, “Go in to my servant; it may be that I shall obtain children by her.” Sarai’s done waiting. She’s done hoping, day after day, that God would change her body so that she would finally be able to have children. Instead, she presents her maidservant, an Egyptian named Hagar, to her husband to have as a second wife, so that Sarai might have children through her.

This was actually a common practice at the time, where a servant would have a child on behalf of her barren mistress. The servant would function as a surrogate mother so that her mistress would no longer suffer the shame of being barren and childless. It wasn’t unusual for this to happen. Sarai wasn’t proposing something that was radical or controversial. It was a culturally accepted way of handling these types of difficulties.

But that didn’t make what she did right. The fact that everyone else was doing it wasn’t a good reason for her to do it, because she had something the rest of the world didn’t. She had the promises of God.

Nevertheless, Abram consents to his wife’s plan. Verse 3 says that Sarai gave Hagar to Abram as a wife, and very quickly she was able to conceive. And as soon as she conceived, Sarai’s plan started to unravel. Verse 4 says that when Hagar “saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress.”

The Hebrew word for “contempt” here means to “consider lightly”. Hagar no longer treated her mistress with the same weightiness, the same reverence or respect that she once did. Indeed, she began to look down on her, because within moments, she was able to do what Sarai had been unable to do for decades: give Abram a child of his own.

Perhaps that meant that she had become more valuable to Abram than Sarai. Perhaps that even meant that she had become more valuable to God. Could she be the means by which God’s promises would break into the world? Was God blessing her in order for her to be a blessing to all the families of the earth?

Sarai isn’t about to wait to find out. She’s furious. She’s so taken up with anger by the way Hagar is treating her that she starts blaming Abram for going along with her plans! Just look at what she says to him in verse 5. “May the wrong done to me be on you!” She’s saying, “I want you to hurt just like I have been hurt. I want you to suffer just like I have suffered. I want you to feel the same pain that I have felt in being looked down upon like trash by my own servant.

That’s bad enough, but then she says something even worse at the end of verse 5: “May the LORD judge between you and me!” Wasn’t she just angry with God? She didn’t trust God, at least not in these moments. The reason why she gave Hagar to Abram was because she felt that she needed to fix God’s mistakes. And yet here, she calls upon the name of the Lord, not to seek him, but to use him to hurt her husband.

Sarai’s furious, and Abram doesn’t know what to do, so he takes the easy way out in verse 6: Behold, your servant is in your power; do to her as you please.” Do whatever you want with her. I don’t care. Just stop bothering me.

That’s what Sarai does. Verse 6 says that she “dealt harshly” with Hagar, a phrase that can also be translated as she “humiliated” her. She treated her like the trash she felt she had become in her servant’s eyes by making life miserable for her. We don’t know what she did, but it was so bad that it caused Hagar to run away. A pregnant woman, alone in the desert, trying to make her way back to her homeland of Egypt, because of the fierce anger of her mistress.

Anger can be a horrible thing. It doesn’t have to be. God is righteously angry against our sin, against wrongdoing, against injustice and oppression. But in the hearts of sinful men and women, anger often does horrible things to ourselves, and to those around us.

Sarai’s example shows us what’s at the heart of anger. Anger comes from believing that we need something, something to validate us, or affirm us, or satisfy us, and then being denied that very thing. It’s not just wanting something. It’s much stronger than that. It’s *needing* something. The difference between wanting and needing is the difference between desiring and demanding. It’s the difference between anticipation and expectation.

We see this so clearly in our children. When they’re hungry but they’re not fed, they get angry. When they want the toy but don’t get it, they get angry. When they think it’s time to watch a show but it’s not, they get angry.

We look at that and roll our eyes and say, “Kids will be kids”, but if we’re honest, we’re not that different. Sarai may not have wanted food, or toys, or shows, but she did want a child. She wanted a child so desperately that she railed at God when she didn’t get one. She lashed out at her husband even though he did exactly what she wanted him to do. She humiliated the faithful servant who had served her for years to the point that she ran away.

Anger can be ugly, and the reality is that the more we care about the thing that we’re denied, the angrier we get. We know what that’s called. It’s called idolatry. It’s valuing something other than God with the value that only God deserves. It’s the thing that we turn to in order to derive our sense of security and significance so that when we don’t have it, we feel like nobodies. When we do have it, we feel like gods.

That’s what gets in the way of waiting on the Lord. It’s our idolatry. The greater our love for things other than God, the weaker our love for God becomes. And the weaker our love for God, the weaker our will to wait.

That’s what happened to Sarai. Her sin wasn’t only that she seized control of the situation without waiting on the Lord. Her sin was that she loved the idea of having children more than she loved God, which is what made her unwilling to wait on the Lord. Her lack of waiting was just the symptom of her lack of love for God.

Idolatry is such a dangerous thing, not only because it contradicts the very purpose of our existence – which is to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength – but because it’s so subtle. Ezekiel 14:3 says that we have taken our idols into our hearts, the place where they dwell unseen and unnoticed. But these two things – our anger when we’re denied them, and our unwillingness to wait on the Lord to provide in his way and in his timing – expose those idols and reveal what it is we are truly worshipping.

(2) **ABRAM’S PASSIVITY**

That’s what Sarai teaches us about waiting upon the Lord. She teaches us that idolatry is at the heart of our failure to wait upon the Lord. What about Abram? What does he have to teach us about waiting upon the Lord? The lesson he has to teach us is quite different, but no less important, leading to our second point: Abram’s Passivity.

If one thing marks Abram’s faith so far in the book of Genesis, it would be this: it was all over the place. It fluctuated so much, going up and down, becoming strong and weak, that one commentator likened his faith to a roller coaster going up and down so much that the reader is staggered by his inconsistency (Kenneth A. Mathews)

Here in Chapter 16, we meet Abram at a point where his faith was down once again. In order to understand what he did wrong, we need to look closely at the language that our text uses to describe these events. After Sarai tells Abram to take Hagar as his wife in verse 2, the text says “And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai.”

If you’ve read the beginning of Genesis recently, you’ll likely have noticed that this phrase sounds familiar. It’s meant to bring our attention to another time when the husband listened to the voice of his wife when he should have listened to the voice of God instead. What Abram did here was a repeat of what Adam did in the Garden. God had told him that he would die if he ate from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, but Eve, having been deceived by the devil, told him the opposite. And as Creation spiraled down into the darkness of sin, God began his curse of Adam with these words:

“Because you have listened to the voice of your wife…” (Genesis 3:17)

The parallels don’t stop there. In verse 3, the text describes the giving of Hagar to Abram as follows:

“Sarai, Abram’s wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her servant, and gave her to Abram her husband as a wife.” (Genesis 16:3)

And how did Genesis 3 describe the giving of the fruit to Adam?

“[Eve] took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate.” (Genesis 3:6)

It’s clear that Genesis 16 is drawing connections with Genesis 3, but the question is why? It appears that the text wants us to see Genesis 16 as a kind of “Second Fall”, a repeat of the original sin committed by our first parents in Eden. We could talk a lot about how that informs our reading of Genesis 16, but we only have time for one observation, and it’s this: Abram’s sin wasn’t just that he did what was wrong. It was that he stood by idly and watched as his wife did what was wrong.

Abram was passive when he should have been active. He was a follower when he should have been a leader. He listened to his wife when he should have listened to God, and because of that, he let his wife dictate their family plans instead of gently leading her back to God’s Word. In this moment, Abram wasn’t just a doubter. He was a failed leader.

We see that again in verses 5-6 as Sarai blames Abram for the offence she had suffered. She’s yelling at him, cursing him, telling him that she wants God to judge him and hurt him, and what does Abram say in response? Does he lovingly correct her? Does he patiently calm her down? No, he chooses the easy way out in verse 6 as he tells her, “Behold, your servant is in your power; do to her as you please.”

How could he say that? At this point, Hagar isn’t just his wife’s maidservant. She’s his own wife as well. They didn’t just have a baby together. Verse 3 says that they got married, and that meant that he was just as responsible for caring for her and protecting her as he was towards Sarai. But does he do that? No. Instead, he tells Sarai to do whatever she wants.

Sarai may have dealt harshly with Hagar by humiliating her and mistreating her, but Abram was the one who allowed it to happen. Hagar may have been his second wife, but she was still his wife, and Abram allowed her to be abused because he was too passive, too selfish, too lazy to do anything about it.

The lesson Abram teaches us about waiting upon the Lord is this: it’s not the same as doing nothing. We may be tempted to think that waiting upon the Lord means that we can sit back and relax because God is going to do everything for us, but that’s dead wrong. Being patient isn’t the same as being passive. Waiting upon the Lord often involves actively doing things. Praying. Studying God’s Word. Seeking counsel. Making wise decisions. Doing what’s right. For Abram, waiting upon the Lord meant that he should have helped Sarai wait upon the Lord. And it meant that he should have protected and cared for Hagar.

But you may ask, how is that waiting upon the Lord? Isn’t that the same as him trying to fix his own problems by himself? It could certainly become that. We could certainly take on the mindset that, “This is all on me. I have to fix this or no one will”, and that would be wrong. But if we prayerfully and humbly seek to do what’s right while entrusting the results to God, we’re still waiting upon the Lord.

Let me take a moment now to address the men. Men, how often have we confused being patient with being passive? How often have we chosen to stay silent rather than speak up, to stand and watch rather than get up and act? How many times have we seen our wives distraught, upset, angry, and retreated into the comforts of our televisions and phones? How many times have we let our wives make harmful decisions, decisions that we knew were wrong or unwise but that we supported, not out of love, but out of laziness? How many times have we said, “Ok, do whatever you want”, not because we thought it was best for them, but because we wanted them to stop getting in our faces?

The sober reality that we need to consider is this: it’s far too easy for our laziness to masquerade as love, how our sloth can dress up as support. That was Adam’s sin. That was Abram’s sin. And now it’s our sin.

(3) **HAGAR’S HOPE**

Sarai’s angry. Abram’s passive. Everyone’s feeling convicted. Where do we find our hope? That leads us to our third point and the final part of our text: Hagar’s Hope.

As Hagar flees from her abusive mistress, verse 7 tells us that she had an unexpected encounter in the wilderness. While she rested at a spring on the way to Shur (which was the desert in northwest Sinai next to Egypt, which was likely where Hagar was going), verse 7 says that “the angel of the LORD found her”.

Much has been written about the identity of the “angel of the LORD” who appears multiple times in the Old Testament. We don’t have time to wade into that debate. I think it’s quite fair to say, however, that the consensus is that the “angel of the LORD” represented God himself.

That’s not immediately clear to Hagar because she speaks to him like she would another human being. But later on in verse 13, she realizes that the one she was speaking to was God himself. It was the LORD who spoke to her, and it was the LORD who saw her in her affliction.

So with the knowledge that it is God speaking to Hagar in mind, we look at the first words he says to her in verse 8: “Hagar, servant of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?” This is the first time in this entire chapter that someone speaks to Hagar by name. Sarai called her “my servant”. Abram called her “your servant”. But the Lord calls her by her own name, *Hagar*, because he wasn’t only interested in using her like Abram and Sarai were. He’s interested in her as a person.

And so, at the very outset, the Lord is showing Hagar that he’s different. He doesn’t just care about what she can do for him. He cares about who she is to him. He loves her with a personal love, a love that focuses on her as a precious individual created in his image. And so, he asks her where she’s coming from and where she’s going, and she replies, “I am fleeing from my mistress Sarai.”

And then in verse 9, the Lord tells her to do the impossible: “Return to your mistress and submit to her.” How could he expect her to do that when Sarai had treated her so harshly? How was that fair? Returning to Sarai was the last thing she wanted to do. She’d rather die than return to that woman. So how would the Lord persuade her?

By doing the same thing he has always done to persuade his people to obey: by giving her a promise. I love how Calvin puts it:

“God stimulates us more powerfully to the performance of duty by promising than by ordering.”

And here, God gives the most unlikely of people – this Egyptian, runaway, slave-girl – one of his precious and very great promises: “I will surely multiply your offspring so that they cannot be numbered for multitude.”

How great is the mercy of God, that he should set his gaze upon the lowliest of people and lift them up with his promises! Why? Because of what the name of Hagar’s son tells us. He is *Ishmael*, which means *God hears*, and what he has heard has been the sound of her affliction. And so, he promises her that she shall bear this son, and he would grow up to become a “wild donkey of a man”, a man who would live with the freedom she always wished she had but didn’t, and no one would be able to tame him.

Notice what God didn’t promise to Hagar. He didn’t promise that Sarai would stop dealing harshly with her. He didn’t promise that her suffering under the heavy hand of her mistress would suddenly disappear. Indeed, as we will see later on in Chapter 21, immediately after Isaac is born, Sarai would urge Abram to “cast out this slave woman with her son, for the son of this slave woman shall not be heir with my son Isaac.” But Hagar’s ok with that, because she has had an encounter with the living God and received the assurance of his care.

And so, in verse 13, she gives the Lord a name. *El-Roi*, “The God Who Sees”. God sees the abused slave. God sees the forgotten wife. God sees the runaway mother who has no hope or family in the world. And when God sees, God cares. Hagar isn’t afraid to return to Sarai anymore, because she has seen the God who sees her, and this God will care for all her needs no matter how hard life may become.

Is that you today? Have you been forgotten, overlooked, neglected? Do you feel alone in the wilderness, a runaway without hope and without a home? Then know this: God sees you. He sees where you are, he sees how you feel, and he is ready to care for all your needs.

Hagar commemorates this occasion by naming the water well “Beer-lahai-roi”, which means “the well of the Living One who sees me”. That was her way of saying that she believed that the God who saw her would always see her. That place would always commemorate the unchanging reality of God’s care for those in need.

God has shown the same care to all of us. God has seen how our sin has afflicted us. He’s seen how our sin has driven us away from him. He’s seen how it has led us into the wilderness of suffering and shame to wander without hope and without a home. But in Christ Jesus, he has sought us out and found us so that we could know him as *El-Roi*, the God who sees. We who were forgotten have now been forgiven through the death of God the Son. He died for our sins. He paid our debt. And he has reconciled us to the God who sees us and cares for us.

**CONCLUSION**

It’s ironic that the hero of Chapter 16 isn’t Abram or his wife Sarai. The hero of this chapter is Hagar. Hagar, the Egyptian slave woman, is the one who responded to God’s promise with faith. And it was her faith that enabled her to obey God’s command to return to her mistress and to wait and see how the Lord would care for her even while she lived under Sarai’s heavy hand.

How do we become more like Hagar? How do we learn to wait upon the Lord like she did? Let me briefly suggest three things.

First, we must identify our idols. Our idols are the greatest threats to our faith. That was the case for Sarai, and that remains the case for us. The reason why we stop waiting for the Lord is because our idols cause us to want something so desperately that we’re not willing to wait any longer, so we seize control of the situation for ourselves.

There are a number of ways to identify your idols, but one of the most important is to examine what makes you angry. What causes you to lash out at your loved ones? What leads you to doubt God? Doubting God may be a subtle struggle that begins in your heart, but it’s only a matter of time before it changes the way you act. You stop praying. You stop wanting to go to church. You stop opening up your life to other people. What tempts you to give up those things? If you take the time to identity that, perhaps with the help of trusted friends and counsellors, it won’t be long before you find your idol.

And when you’ve found it, you need to discipline yourself to surrender it to the Lord. Learn to wait upon the Lord for it, not just once or twice, but every day, because our idols have a powerful grip on our hearts. We need to identify our idols if we are to learn to trust in God and wait upon him to care for us.

Second, we must check our motives. For those who are inclined to being passive, you need to ask yourself the question, “Am I waiting on the Lord? Or am I using that as an excuse to be lazy?” Similarly, for those who always want to do things and solve your own problems, you need to ask yourself, “Am I trusting in God to take care of this? Or am I trusting in myself?” For the passive, there’s a fine line between waiting on the Lord and being sinfully passive. For the active, there’s a fine line between doing what’s right and leaving God behind. We need to check our motives, so that whether we’re inclined to passivity or action, we would become people who do what’s right while trusting God for the result.

Third, we must see the One who sees us. We must spend time with God in the Word and in prayer remembering that God doesn’t just see us as a mass of people. He sees me. He sees you. He sees us as individual people whom he cares for with an everlasting love, just as he cared for Hagar. Hagar ultimately didn’t come to trust God by rehearsing propositions or seeking counselling, but by having an encounter with the living God. That’s what God has made possible through Jesus Christ. Christ has made a way for us to encounter God every day, through his blood, in the power of the Holy Spirit. And so, may the God who sees us give us eyes to see him, that we might turn to him and believe.