

Life of Faith 7: If Our Family is Messed Up, He Remains Faithful

Please turn to Genesis 16, and tonight we continue a series that's been 5 months since the last message it. I took summer off from my Genesis series and we've heard other messages and speakers in the meanwhile and will continue to, but when it's my turn I want to continue in it because I love this book and the deeper I study it, the deeper I understand Scripture and Christ. I've preached 71x from Genesis, 64 messages chapters 1-12 which are so foundational to the rest. But as we move through the later chapters we are picking up the pace, sometimes 1 sermon per chapter, chapter 16 tonight we'll cover in one message, Lord-willing. Now just to remind you, chapters 12-25 cover the life of Abraham (still called Abram at this point) and I'm looking at big themes in them on The Life of Faith:

Gen 12 – The Life of Faith, Part 1: Sovereign Effectual Calling

Gen 13 – The Life of Faith, Part 2: Not By Sight (Lot/Sodom)

Gen 14 – Warfare (Part 3), Witness, Wealth, Worship (Part 4),
The Priest and King We All Need (Part 5)

Gen 15 – Trusting Our Covenant-Keeping Savior (Part 6)

Gen 16 – Part 7 tonight: God Faithful to Messed Up Families

Even if ours is unfaithful or less than ideal, God is faithful

This time the text doesn't highlight the faith of Abram, his faith is stumbling, his family gets messed up ... *but God* remains faithful. The hero will not be Abram, or any human character, it's the God who has been the Hero all along, but this time especially obviously

[after great blessing (chap 15) comes great testing (chap 16)]

16:1 *Now Sarai, Abram's wife had borne him no children, and she had an Egyptian maid whose name was Hagar. ² So Sarai said to Abram, "Now behold, the LORD has prevented me from bearing children. Please go in to my maid; perhaps I will obtain children through her." And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai. ³ 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. ⁴ He went in to Hagar, and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress was despised in her sight. ⁵ 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." ⁶ 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 ... [no human heroes here, a heroic Christ is needed, and will come]*

One of the titles I thought: “Divine Faithfulness for Dysfunctional Families.” We’ll see God’s faithfulness in the 2nd half of Gen 16.

We certainly see a family not functioning as God designed in Gen:

- 2:24 says 1 man and 1 woman are to be joined as husband and wife and the 2 become one flesh sexually – but Abram has joined himself to two wives, at his first wife’s urging!
- In 2:15-17 God speaks to Adam directly apart from Eve so that the man is to teach and lead his wife spiritually. Same pattern with God speaking audibly to Abram directly in chapters 12 and 15 apart from his wife, and God commands the man to instruct and lead his family spiritually (18:19)
- But just like in Genesis 3, the roles are reversed, and a wife is leading and thinking sinfully, her husband not protecting and leading her spiritually, she leads him into sin, and he follows. The last phrase in Genesis 16:2 “*Abram listened to the voice of Sarai*” is an echo of Gen 3:17 where God says to Adam “*you listened to the voice of your wife...*” (i.e. you listened in the sense of obeying her and followed her into sin instead of leading her to listen to and follow and obey the Lord into His truth). ‘She led you sinfully, Adam, when I called you Adam to lead her spiritually and be her head to protect her by leading away from sin and sinful thinking.’ It is again a dysfunction – not functioning in God-given roles
- And in both cases (Gen 3 and 16) the sin of the parents has lasting consequences to their descendant to come. Adam and Eve, the only perfect parents ever, after they fell from their originally perfect state into sin, their sin has affected all their children since, starting with their first two, son # 1 kills son #2 in Genesis 4 (the exact opposite of the function God gave to families for life, fruitfulness and multiplying in Gen 1—you can’t get much more dysfunctional than that!)
- But Abram, the most righteous man on earth, also had one big unhappy family among his first 2 sons and descendants from them through Ishmael in Hagar’s womb, and later the Israelite descendants through Isaac. His is a dysfunctional and dis-unified and destructive family to this day, brothers against brothers, which is what God prophesies in v. 12 and they still want to kill each other, Ishmaelites and Israelites, Arabs and Israelis, and Arabs among their Arab brethren who’ve been far deadlier enemies to Arabs than Israel/U.S.
- The family feud starts in v. 4 before either boy is born, as a barren wife bitter against God (v. 2) sees her servant (later called “the slave woman”) pregnant, and the tension grows

- We don't know if Sarai was first offended by Hagar's body language, or if it was initially just her body, her belly. It doesn't say she was sticking her tummy out to make a statement, or if Sarai just felt she did, I don't know if Hagar or Sarai provoked the conflict verbally (I suspect probably a little of both) but we do know by v. 5, Sarai complains to Abram angrily about how Hagar is looking at her. She says basically "I don't like how she's looking at me, and so I'm mad at you now..." Pettiness, cattiness, childishness is in her words, but also bitterness towards Hagar *and to Abram*
- Sarai is determined to win this cat-fight with Hagar, and Abram doesn't step up or man up, but in v. 6 he's more like a dog with his tail between his legs, abdicating his headship and responsibility in the face of a sinful wife, not wanting to get involved, not even showing love to the 2nd wife of his who's carrying his firstborn son. He basically says to Sarai "She's *your slave*, just go do whatever you want with her"
- Not "she's *my wife, and that's my son*. This wasn't right of me to let it go down this way, but I take responsibility of it as the leader of this household, and I ask your forgiveness for my sin. I'll work to make it right and I need to treat her right as her husband, so let's pray about this and see what God wants us to do." No, '*she's your problem, I don't know ...do whatever you think. I'm not asking you to pray about it or even come back to me with your thoughts, this is your sphere, your slave, you gotta deal with it, it's not my job...*'
- Things haven't improved much since Genesis 3, or today. The situations in your lives may be a little different, but the sin nature is the same. All families dis-function since Gen 3
- I'm sure some in this room have had drama this week with family, spouses, parent-child conflicts, dads who abdicate, and moms who harshly dominate or manipulate a situation, conflict between siblings, not just immature kids ("mom, he's looking at me again. I don't like how he's looking at me!") 'Ok, Phil, stop looking at your sister at the breakfast table, put the cereal box between you so you can't see each other'), not just that, church families can be childish, too.
- Drama can occur between church women today who don't live near each other and don't see each other often. In Gen. 16, if you can imagine *these 2 ladies everyday sharing the same women's quarters and sharing the same husband*, this is a love triangle drama deeper than any daytime soap opera and a family conflict un-resolvable by daytime talk shows!

- A dysfunctional big brouhaha is brewing in the tent, and it boils over as Sarai scalds and scolds Abram and his wife #2
- You get the impression Sarai was a strong personality, but whatever Abram's personality, he is in sin for throwing up his hands and trying to wash his hands, and Abram's sin of abdication surrenders to Sarai's sinful domination, grinding Hagar to the point of desperation in v. 6 so that Hagar feels she has no choice but to become a runaway single mother

Proverbs 30 says "*under three things the earth quakes*" and two of them are right here: "*an unloved woman when she gets a husband, And a maidservant when she supplants her mistress*" (v. 21, 23).

There's earth-shaking stuff going on in the tent with these two women, and the shaking ground opens and erupts and it's volcanic, and the ash and aftermath will fall in the middle east for centuries. At this point, all Abram's camels, all his horses and all of his men couldn't put this back together again, he needs the King to come. It's the theme of Genesis and the Bible, and He comes in Gen 16.

But before we look at the 2nd half of this chapter we need to know that every family has been messed up since Genesis 3. Adam and Eve we've already talked about, then Noah, next great character in Genesis and godly family. His "my three sons" weren't the perfect sitcom stereotype either; Genesis 9 records one son dishonoring his dad who's drunk passed out naked in the tent. The consequences of that sin would affect the descendants of Canaan for generations to come as they would be subjected to later godly descendants of the line of Shem through Abraham (in Israel's conquest of Canaanites)

And just as the sin of Abram and his family in his tent would affect 2 lines of descendants in a multi-generational way after Genesis 16 the pattern will be repeated later in Genesis with Lot and his girls who get him drunk so they can get pregnant by him and descendant Moabites from that union become perpetual enemies of the people of God (though Lot is described as 'righteous' by God in 2 Pet 2:7)

There are a lot of messed up godly families like Lot's in Genesis. Later Abram's godly son Isaac, will see some dysfunctional in his tent, with his 2 sons and 2 lines of descendants, Jacob and Esau (father of Edomites, perpetual enemies of Jacob's family tree) and the deception and discord and drama in Jacob's tent affects his 12 sons/descendants from his 2 wives and their maids is even worse!

And so we need to see that story line, and realize that the godliest of men and families for the first 2,000 years since Genesis 3 are all messed up and need Christ, and so are we and so do we. Gen. 3:15 promised 2 different lines of descendants from Adam and Eve, the ungodly seed of the serpent (those whose father is the devil, as Jesus said to the unsaved in John 8) and Eve's godly seed, the line of the godly, and the Messiah-King to come, one born of a woman who will crush Satan's head and conquer sin and its consequences.

The sins of the father are visited on the children for generations on those who hate the Lord, but He also shows faithful steadfast love to thousands of those who love Him (Ex 20:5-6), breaking a cycle of generational sin. In the law, there is gospel, and in the Torah, in the opening books of the Bible, we see God's faithful steadfast covenant lovingkindness shown not just to the line of promise, the tribe of Judah, Isaac's grandson. Not just within the Israelites, but also God's faithful love is shown to Canaanites and Edomites and Moabites and Ishmaelites, even people some consider parasites! In the New Testament, Paul says the gospel was preached first in Gen 12:3 to Abraham, that all families of the earth would be blessed in him, and that includes messed up families, as we'll see in Gen 16.

And this gospel in Genesis, this good news from the OT is that this same faithful steadfast love of God is available to all the families of the earth today, even messed up families, which is all of us, it's just a matter of the degree of dysfunction or disorder in our homes.

The NT adds to this: *If we are faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself*" (2 Tim 2:13). And God is faithful in Gen 16 to what He promised Abram in Gen 12 and 15, and shows faithful love to someone outside that promise, an Egyptian slave woman. It was in chapter 12, that Abram was unfaithful, talking his wife into sin by lying and pretending she was his sister when they went to Egypt, and Pharaoh took Sarai wrongly to be his wife. Times had been tough in a barren land, but Abram didn't ask God in prayer, he just made up his own plan, and led her where he wanted, and it was disastrous ... *but God* proved faithful despite his disbelief.

Now irony is, the shoe is on the other foot (or at least the sandal) as times get tough again. The land isn't barren, but Sarai still is, and has been for decades of marriage, and 10 years since the promise, and this time she comes up with her own plan without consulting God, and she talks her husband into sin by taking a wife wrongly.

And ironically this very servant woman that Pharaoh gave Abram on that ill-fated trip to Egypt as a gift when he took Sarai to be his wife (12:15-16), Sarai gives that Egyptian to Abram to be his wife

There are not only echoes of Gen 12, but also Gen 3, when Abram lets his wife do whatever is good in her sight, even if it was wrong, Adam earlier had let Eve do what was wrong based on what was “good to the sight,” even though he was “with her” (Gen 3:7). The same verse says Eve “took” and “gave” what was forbidden to her husband who went along with it, just as Sarai “took ... gave” Hagar to her husband who went along with it, contrary to God’s Word.

But I want to be sensitive to Sarai who already has the stigma of an infertile woman in a culture where a woman’s worth was tied up in her children, and she has been waiting for this promise for 10 years (16:3 says). Hey, I have a hard time waiting on the Lord in far less trying circumstances! We don’t even have a promise from heaven for some of the things we’re waiting anxiously for, and most of us sinfully respond long before our waiting reaches the 10-year mark.

[frustration and frantic action comes more naturally than faith]

One writer says: ‘Those of us who have very young children know how difficult waiting can be. We live through their annual anguish of waiting for birthday parties. Each day of the week -- or, in some cases, the month -- before their birthdays roll around, they wake up with the question, “Is it my birthday yet?” Finally, the great day arrives, and you immediately have to convince them that 6:30 AM is not the ideal time of day for a party. By 6:45 AM, they are thoroughly convinced you don’t love them, and that all this talk of a party is nothing but a cruel hoax. At this point, you know it’s going to be a long day. Don’t we often act toward God like little children?...we want what God has promised, and we want it *now*.’¹

[like the girl who sang “Don’t care how, I want it now!”]

Remember Eve didn’t hear God audibly give the instructions about the tree, only her husband did. And Sarai didn’t hear God audibly speak to Abram about his family tree and many descendants. It seems Satan is again whispering again in another wife’s ear in v. 2:

‘Did God really say...you a barren lady over age 70 are going to have children? Abram is over 80 and maybe He didn’t hear quite right. God’s keeping you barren but he’s given you another way in Hagar! Why would God forbid you from something that will make you happy? He wants you to be happy by having a kid, He’s all for kids (I can quote you the verse from Gen 1:28). But you can’t just wait, God helps those who help Him out. Everybody’s doing it.’

Everybody *was* doing it. It was acceptable and legal in the world of the time, for hundreds of years prior. A marriage agreement archaeology has found from this time and part of the world says: “If [wife] bears children, [husband] shall not take another wife. But if [wife] fails to bear children, [husband] shall get for [his 1st wife] a woman from the Lullu country (i.e., a slave girl) as concubine. In that case [first wife] shall have authority over the offspring.” The Code of Hammurabi recognized that didn’t always go well, so it added a prenuptial law put in place for this kind of 2nd wife drama: ‘that if a concubine claims equality with her mistress because she bore children, her mistress may demote her to her former status.’²

That sheds light on this text. It says in Gen 16:6 that Sarah “treated harshly” or “mistreated” this Egyptian slave. The same Heb. word was used for what Egyptians would do to Hebrew slaves in 15:13. In a reversal of the later Hebrew flight from their harsh slavery in Egypt to travel through the wilderness to Canaan, Hagan flees her harsh slavery in Canaan to travel through the wilderness to Egypt.

The original readers of Genesis and Exodus were in the wilderness (same word as Gen 16:7) when Moses wrote these first 5 books of our Bible to a people who also often had a hard time waiting for God’s promise. They were a lot like Sarai in that regard, and they were also like Hagar in that when times got difficult, they wanted to go back to Egypt. Israel in Numbers 14:3 says “Wouldn’t it be better for us to go back to Egypt?” Hagar thought so, and she tries the long dangerous desert journey alone as a pregnant woman. But the Lord who would be like a husband to Israel in her wanderings through the same wilderness, He seeks out this wanderer, and as a faithful husband (unlike Abram) He shows great care for her and He gives her a grace greater than Sarai or even Abram had known.

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 [almost to Egypt].*

⁸ *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.”* ⁹ *Then the angel of the LORD said to her, “Return to your mistress, and submit yourself to her authority.”* ¹⁰ *Moreover, the angel of the LORD said to her, “I will greatly multiply your descendants so that they will be too many to count.”* ¹¹ *The angel of the LORD said to her further, “Behold, you are with child, And you will bear a son; And you shall call his name Ishmael, Because the LORD has given heed to your affliction.*

¹² *“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.”* [NKJV “in the presence of his brothers”; ESV “against all his kinsmen”] ¹³ *Then she called the name of the LORD who spoke to her, “You are a God who sees”; for she said, “Have I even remained alive here after seeing Him?”* [NKJV gives alternate “Him who sees me”; ESV “who looks after me”] ¹⁴ *Therefore the well was called Beer-lahai-roi; behold, it is between Kadesh and Bered.* ¹⁵ *So Hagar bore Abram a son; and Abram called the name of his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael.* ¹⁶ *Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to him.*

To say Ishmael would be a “wild donkey of a man” or a “wild ass among men” (ASV) sounds like an insult, but it’s actually not. It meant as a ‘wild donkey lived a solitary existence in the desert away from society... Ishmael would be free-roaming, strong, and like a bedouin; he would enjoy the freedom his mother sought.’³

But there is a negative in v. 12: Ishmael and his descendants will be in perpetual conflict with their brethren, and that prophecy is as true 4,000 years later as it was when the Lord said it. 16:14 mentions a well where she realized she’s talking to the Lord. ‘In this gracious encounter by the well, we are reminded of another woman who met the Lord beside a well, the woman of Samaria (John 4). [also a foreigner the Lord revealed Himself to] She too found that the Lord saw right through her, even to the depths of her sin, yet was still seeking to turn her into a true worshiper.’⁴

“Both Hagar and Mary [the mother of Jesus] stand as examples of women who obediently accepted God’s word and thereby brought blessing to descendants too many to count.”⁵

This chapter doesn’t highlight the faith of Abram or his wife, but it highlights instead the faithfulness of God when our faith falters. God sees, knows, and cares, and is faithful to messed up families.

‘As she thinks about the significance of God seeing and knowing her so particularly, she is baffled by His mercy when she had been so selfish and head-strong. She had removed herself from serving in her place of duty, and had even spitefully borne away the child for which Abram and Sarai waited. She is in tender wonderment that God has spared her in the confrontation. “Have I even remained alive here after seeing Him?”

... the God who hears can work even at the back side of a remote desert that seems to be at the end of nowhere. Second, God can give new, wise direction in an interchange of prayer ... Third, even a lowly servant in a home turns out to have high value for a compassionate God to pursue in a venue of prayer. Fourth, God not only listens to prayer, but displays ability in the ways He can look after one who turns to do what He says.⁶

'the angel indicated that Ishmael was not the promised son, and his descendants would not inherit the land—this would be reserved for another son. Hagar accepted this and prayed to God before returning to Sarai. She called Him the “God of seeing,” or “El-Roi” (Gen 16:13), unwittingly affirming what Sarai and Abram had overlooked: God oversees and directs everything, and those who follow Him never have any reason to doubt His plan.⁷

For further study:

God's Overtaking Mercy (Genesis 16:8-13) Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit, Volume 62, Sermon # 3525, Year 1916
<http://www.spurgeongems.org/vols61-63/vols61-63.htm>

Hagar at the Fountain (Genesis 16:13-14) Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit, Volume 31, Sermon # 1869, Year 1885
<http://www.spurgeongems.org/vols31-33/vols31-33.htm>

¹ Iain Duguid, *Living in the Gap Between Promise and Reality: The Gospel According to Abraham*, p. 66.

² Nuzi tablet number 67, original names Gilimniniu and Shennima, and Law 146 of Hammurabi's Code, as cited by Kent Hughes, *Genesis*, p. 238.

³ *NET Bible Notes* (Biblical Studies Press, 2006).

⁴ Duguid, 70-71.

⁵ Tom Constable, *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible* (Galaxie Software, 2003), Ge 16:1.

⁶ James E. Rosscup, *An Exposition on Prayer in the Bible: Igniting the Fuel to Flame Our Communication With God* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2008), 44.

⁷ Michael R. Grigoni, Miles Custis, Douglas Mangum and Matthew M. Whitehead, *Abraham: Following God's Promise* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2012).