

When We Try to Help God Out (Everybody Suffers)

Genesis 16

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Introduction

One of my most memorable moments in high school happened one day in our woodworking class. Imagine a class of 20 teen-age boys... in a room full of power saws. Of course we all 'knew everything', but there was one boy who knew more than the rest. He was often in trouble, consistently rebellious, didn't listen and didn't care. One day he had an accident on the table saw. Fortunately it was relatively minor; our teacher cleaned up the cut bandaged the injured hand. More importantly – and what I remember most – was this wise teacher using the incident as a teaching moment. He gathered us all around the saw, this white-faced kid standing there with a fresh bandage on his hand, and explained the mistakes that had been made. It was a powerful lesson for all of us.

This chapter is a warning story, a warning about what happens when we try to do things our way instead of God's, even – as in this case – when our goal might be the same as his. It's also a picture of our God, the restorer-redeemer and finally, there is an implicit message for us to move on in obedience and trust.

I. A Warning about 'Our Way'

A. Summary of Scene One

Our chapter has 3 scenes, the first scene being vv. 1-6. In v. 1, we are introduced to Sarai and her problem – she is barren; she and Abram have no children (even though, 10 years before, they were promised an heir by God). We can't overstate this problem. The Wycliffe Bible commentary describes the situation: "As the years rolled by, the discrepancy between the promise and the circumstances became more and more baffling. To be childless was a calamity and a disgrace for any Hebrew wife, and it was much worse for Sarai." (Remember God's promise.)

In the ancient world, a woman obtained honour through marriage and childbearing. According to Sarai, her situation is God's fault. He has kept her from having children. But...she has a plan. She can work around God's interference (or his neglect, tardiness). She has a servant girl, Hagar, who can possibly be the surrogate mother (an accepted custom in the land). Hagar was Sarai's servant girl. She has possibly come with Sarai to the marriage as part of her dowry. Sometimes it was written into marriage contracts that if the wife could not bear children, the servant girl could be a surrogate. She was considered 'property', a legal extension of her mistress. (Hagar did not have the benefit of our 'charter of rights and freedoms'!) This wasn't considered polygamy at the time; polygamy did exist but wasn't that common, mainly for financial reasons – the average man simply could not afford more than one wife...

Sarai explains the plan to Abram, who agrees; ‘this is how we’ll get our promised heir’. They follow through on the plan and Hagar conceives. That’s when everything starts to unravel. Now Hagar looks down on Sarai, her master, because suddenly she’s in the power position of carrying the child – Sarai is still barren. Sarai (and Abram’s) plan has created incredible tension in the home, and she blames Abram. His response? “She’s your servant in your hands (i.e. your problem, not mine). With this *carte blanche*, Sarai begins mistreating Hagar, to the point where she runs away – a runaway slave, a woman on her own, pregnant, alone in the desert. Sarai’s plan didn’t work. Now she’s lost her servant and her and Abram have lost a child.

This is scene 1. It ends in a tragic mess.

B. Picture of a Fall

Let’s step back and look at what’s happened to this home, to Sarai, Abram and Hagar. We have here a picture of a *fall* and a clear warning from God.

1. It begins with a false understanding of God (v.2) – “He has kept me from having children”. Sarai’s message is ‘he has failed me; he has abandoned me; he hasn’t kept his promise’. When we accept a false understanding of God, when we nurse a lie about who God is instead of living in the truth, we’re not far from trouble. This was Satan’s tactic in Gen. 3: God had said ‘all the trees are acceptable except one. Eat of the forbidden tree, and you will die’. Satan challenged God’s character, that he wasn’t telling the truth: ‘you won’t die, you’ll know good and evil – you’ll be like God’. Adam and Eve accepted a lie about God instead of believing and living by the truth God had given them.

2. Secondly, we see a decision to go our own way – rebellion. Sarai and Abram decide, if God isn’t going to give us what we want (what HE promised!), we’ll go our own way. It’s a decision not to wait for God’s timing. It was Sarai’s idea, but Abram went along fully. Notice how the writer parallels *the* fall of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3: Eve chooses to believe Satan’s lie, decides to take the fruit, gives it to her husband and he goes along – both have disobeyed God. The foundation started to crumble when Sarai and Abram didn’t accept the truth about God (that he would be faithful to his word). Now they’re building on that precarious base and, like the house built on sand, trouble is inevitable.

Years ago when I attended the British Columbia Institute of Technology, we had a business simulation project using a computer program. One of the interesting facets of this program was that it allowed groups to choose an illegal course of action, an ethical short cut. For some reason, our group thought this might be a good strategy and so we took the bait. We should have known the program would be set up to catch every illegal act, but for some reason, we thought we could bend the rules and nothing negative would happen. We did, of course, get caught and penalized for our transgression. Our ‘rebellion’ produced the inevitable result.

3. Thirdly in our picture of a fall, we see symptoms of disobedience.

a. God wasn’t the solution; the slave girl was. She was something under Sarai’s control (she thought), a *possession that would give her what she so desperately wanted!* As a side note, isn’t it interesting how things we think we own/control, things that ‘serve us’, can end up being our

masters, actually having control over us. This is what happened to Sarai. Her slave girl ended up spoiling the whole picture.

b. Then there was the shifting of blame. In Sarai's eyes, the whole thing was Abram's fault. His response mirrored hers: "She's YOUR slave girl – you deal with her". Again the writer parallels Gen. 3: When God confronts Adam and Eve, Adam blames Eve and Eve blames the serpent. Our response can be very similar. "This mess isn't my fault, it's someone else's". That is a symptom of rebellion.

c. Conflict is another symptom. Hagar is in conflict with Sarai. Sarai's in conflict with her. Abram and Sarai are in conflict with each other. It's all one big unhappy family. They tried to go around God's plan and strife, tension and conflict were the results. James 4.1-3 says: *"What is causing the quarrels and fights among you? Don't they come from the evil desires at war within you? ² You want what you don't have, so you scheme and kill to get it. You are jealous of what others have, but you can't get it, so you fight and wage war to take it away from them. Yet you don't have what you want because you don't ask God for it. ³ And even when you ask, you don't get it because your motives are all wrong—you want only what will give you pleasure."* James describes, from a spiritual standpoint, exactly what this family was going through, and what WE will go through when we live against God's plan.

C. The Warning

What we have in this passage is a warning. Remember it was written by Moses, under God's inspiration, when the nation of Israel was wandering in the desert. Times were tough and they were complaining. They didn't want to go forward to the Promised Land, the land of God's blessing. Instead, they wanted to go back to the slavery of Egypt. There was impatience and rebellion brewing. Sound familiar? God gives them this story, through Moses, as a warning: stay faithful, don't go your own way.

When we set aside God's way, trouble follows. Gal. 6.7-8 tells us: *"⁷ Don't be misled—you cannot mock the justice of God. You will always harvest what you plant. ⁸ Those who live only to satisfy their own sinful nature will harvest decay and death from that sinful nature. But those who live to please the Spirit will harvest everlasting life from the Spirit."* "God is not mocked." He has established the laws of the universe – physical, spiritual, moral. God's moral laws are just as sure as the law of gravity, in fact more so, because heaven and earth will pass away, but his Word will not. Abram and Sarai disobeyed God's plan, and it led them into trouble.

II. Divine Rescue

Scene 2 of our story, vv. 7-14, is a divine rescue. The other day I noticed 2 quotes on the sign of a church near our home. The first was "Only pray on days that end in 'Y'" (yes, that's all of them). The second, relevant to our story today, was "A setback sets the way for a comeback". Hagar, in our first scene, ran away and was alone in the desert. Now, through God's divine intervention, she's going to make a comeback.

A. Summary of Scene Two

The angel of the Lord (God, Jehovah) meets her near a spring in the desert, beside the road to Shur. There are a couple interesting pictures here: (1) she's a *woman at a well*, being met by

God; sound familiar? (2) Shur is a town near the border to Egypt; a fortified border with forts and walls to protect Egypt from outside invaders. Metaphorically, this woman is up against the wall. She's a slave on the run. She's a woman (in an ancient culture) alone; she's pregnant and homeless... And God, Jehovah sees her and calls her by name (and knows she's the servant of Sarai). He also asks her a very important question: Where have you come from and where are you going?

This is a picture of Almighty God, creator of heaven and earth. No matter how desperate your situation may seem to be, God sees you, knows your name, cares about what you've been through and where you are going. Hagar answers the question: "I'm running away from my master Sarai". Notice that she is completely honest. There are no excuses, no blame, just the truth – she's a slave on the run. The angel's response might not be what we'd hope for, but he tells her to go back to Sarai: 'go back to your mistress and submit to her'. He also gives her a blessing: you're going to have a son and your descendants will be too numerous to count. She's given her son's name (Ishmael, which means 'God has heard'), and even his personality (v. 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 toward all his brothers."* I couldn't help but thinking, if Ishmael played hockey, he'd be the agitator, the enforcer. This may not sound like a blessing but think of Hagar's circumstances. She started her journey as the helpless slave, running for her life, alone and in incredible danger. Now she is told she's going to be the matriarch of many descendants, and her son won't be a slave to anyone. He'll be a wild Bedouin that won't take orders from anyone. It's an amazing reversal of fortune, an amazing rescue from God.

She gives the angel (Jehovah) a name: "The God who sees me" and she names the well "Beer Lahai Roi" which means "the well of the living one who sees me". Notice the difference between her understanding of God and Sarai's. In v. 2, Sarai essentially names God 'the one who has failed me' (He's closed my womb), but Hagar knows God as living and caring for her.

B. A Picture of Restoration

What does restoration look like from Hagar's experience? Spiritual restoration – getting things right in our soul – involves two questions. The two questions God asks Hagar are the ones he also asks us: 'Where have you come from?' and 'Where are you going?'

1. Where have you come from?

Hagar answers with honesty; she's a runaway slave. Notice the difference from scene one – the fall. Abram and Sarai were blaming each other. Hagar simply answers honestly – I'm a runaway slave. No blaming someone else, no excuses. Here I am and this is my desperate situation. Regardless of where we've 'come from', God can work in us when we're completely open before him. 1 John 1.8-9 says: *"If we claim we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and not living in the truth. But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness."* Do you need restoration or rescue in your life? Begin by being completely honest before God.

2. Where are you going?

What are your plans, hopes, dreams and passions? What do you worship and treasure? Where are you going? Hagar was headed back to Egypt, but God gave her a different plan, and she

obeyed. She followed what God had for her. God says go back to your mistress and submit to her, and she does. Why is it sometimes so hard for us to follow God, to trust him and submit to his leading? We may not always understand God's ways and his timing (actually we never fully understand), as God reminds us through the prophet Isaiah.

Is. 55.8-9 (NLT) reads: *"My thoughts are nothing like your thoughts," says the LORD. "And my ways are far beyond anything you could imagine. For just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so my ways are higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts."*

We were talking about truth earlier, about having a right understanding of God. Here is an important one we don't want to miss: his ways are higher than ours. We can trust him because he has the ultimate 'big picture' and he loves us.

God's appearance to Job (Job 38-42) gives us an amazing picture of who he is. In chapter 38.1-4 we read: *"Then the LORD answered Job from the whirlwind [God arrives in a tornado!]: "Who is this that questions my wisdom with such ignorant words? Brace yourself like a man, because I have some questions for you, and you must answer them. "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell me, if you know so much.""* It's important to note Job's response: 42.5-6: *"I had only heard about you before, but now I have seen you with my own eyes. [Remember Hagar: 'I have seen the God who sees me.'] I take back everything I said, and I sit in dust and ashes to show my repentance."*

How does restoration happen? How does God rescue us? When we truly see him, we respond to his invitation in honest repentance, admitting who we are. Then we go forward – as Hagar did, as Job did – in obedience to him...and:

- He lifts us up out of slavery,
- He lifts us up out of the dust and ashes to be adopted as his children, welcomed into his very presence (Hebrews 4.16).

III. A Call to 'His Way'

A. Summary of Scene Three (vv. 15-16)

In scene 3, Hagar returns to Abram and Sarai. She delivers her son and Abram names him "Ishmael". Notice the obedience here, even in the name. As far as I know, only Hagar was told what the name would be. It appears she told Abram and he followed what had been told to her by God. As we'll see in the very next chapter, Abram and Sarai still have struggles with their faith, but they carry on in obedience. Abram is 86 years old when Ishmael is born.

B. You Are Here...

Where are you in this story today?

1. Are you in v. 2, facing a difficult, maybe overwhelming problem and struggling to wait on God's solution or understand his will. You have a few ideas of your own, and you're dying to try them out. You think God has forgotten his promise to you, or maybe he doesn't even care about your situation. You're desperate for... [add your own situation], and God just isn't coming through. This story is a warning: Don't run ahead. Don't try to shortcut what God will do in

your life, in his time. The result could be disaster, or in the least, a setback. God can bring forgiveness and renewal when we sin, but we may still have to live with the consequences of our bad choices. What is Abram and Sarai's message to us? Stick to God's plan. No shortcuts, no schemes. Stick to God's plan for his blessing.

2. Maybe you're in v. 6. Things haven't worked out like you planned. There's strife and conflict, tension and stress. You don't know how you'll survive, let alone get to a life of blessing. This story gives hope. God sees you. He knows all about your situation and he cares. He'll meet any of us 'at the well' once we get there, once we're ready to be completely honest and repentant before him. "It's me, Lord. I'm just a runaway slave – to sin. I'm a slave to all these things in my life. I've run out of options; only you can save me." That's where God meets us. Then he asks us to follow him in complete obedience. He's our Almighty, loving Lord – and he calls us to love him with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. That's what Abram and Sarai would tell us.

3. Finally, maybe you're Sarai in v.17 (there isn't one)

I wonder how she felt. Hagar's back in the house, caring for Ishmael. Abram's doting on his only son. In vv. 15-16, Sarai's not even mentioned. Was she living with regrets? Did she feel like the blessing was lost? Are you living this way today? Maybe the dark days are behind you, but there's a pain there that still haunts you, robs you of joy, holds you back from service and intimacy with God. God has better for you. He doesn't want you carrying that burden. If we peek ahead to chapter 17, we notice something amazing: God gives Abram and Sarai new names. For Abram, the old man with one son, it's "Abraham" – 'father of many'. For Sarai, the old, childless (to this point) woman, it's "Sarah", which means 'princess'! This is God's way. This is what he has for you and for me when we follow him.

Conclusion

I want to conclude with an illustration I received this week, called 'The Refiner's Touch'.

The Refiners Touch

There was a group of women in a Bible study on the book of Malachi. As they were studying chapter three they came across verse three which says, "He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver." This verse puzzled the women and they wondered what this statement meant about the character and nature of God.

One of the women offered to find out about the process of refining silver and get back to the group at their next Bible study. That week the woman called up a silversmith and made an appointment to watch him at work. She didn't mention anything about the reason for her interest in silver beyond her curiosity about the process of refining silver. As she watched the silversmith, he held a piece of silver over the fire and let it heat up. He explained that, in refining silver, one needed to hold the silver in the middle of the fire where the flames were hottest so as to burn away all the impurities.

The woman thought about God holding us in such a hot spot - then she thought again about the verse, that He sits as a refiner and purifier of silver. She asked the silversmith if it was true that

he had to sit there in front of the fire the whole time the silver was being refined. The man answered that yes, he not only had to sit there holding the silver, but he had to keep his eyes on the silver the entire time it was in the fire. If the silver was left even a moment too long in the flames, it would be destroyed.

The woman was silent for a moment. Then she asked the silversmith, "How do you know when the silver is fully refined?" He smiled at her and answered, "Oh, that's the easy part -- when I see my image reflected in it."

Author Unknown

God calls you and me to be in relationship with him, and he is the Master Refiner. May he give you the strength and the faith to be honest before him and follow him completely.

Benediction - Jude vv. 24-25

"To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy – to the only God our Saviour be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen."