

From Abused and Neglected to Loved and Protected

Genesis 16:1-16 • January 5, 2020 • Christmas 2



There are few who can entirely escape the pressures of a crumbling family. And those who have suffered neglect or abuse in the home know how painful it can be. Today we see how the abused and neglected are not alone. We find in Genesis 16 one family that crumbled and one woman who felt abused and neglected. Her life and family were crumbling into despair. But God was there with a plan and his care.

If we wanted to search for a faithful couple in Scripture, Abram and Sarai could have been epitome of it! Their entire caravan, Abram's nephew Lot, and all their servants had to look up to Abram and Sarai as a shining example of faithful husband and wife. Make no mistake. Abram and Sarai lived in difficult circumstances. They had left behind their homeland. That alone puts a good deal of stress on a relationship. But it held fast. They lived surrounded by a culture that put very little value on the blessings of monogamy. But Abram takes only one wife and stays with her. Their marriage relationship continues as they reached the ages of 85 and 75.

Perhaps the biggest challenge they faced was the inability to have their own children. Abram consigned himself to the fact that it was now impossible for him and Sarai to have their own children. Sarai had no doubt been in tears for years. With the obvious before her she tells her husband in defeat, "The Lord has kept me from having children." But at least they had each other and were still husband and wife, right? It seemed like their marriage would never crumble. Until now.

Sarai had an apparently absurd plan. "The Lord has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my maidservant. Perhaps I can build a family through her." You'd expect Abram to take it as a joke. You'd think this couldn't happen! But Sarai was serious! And Abram listened to her! Then Sarai, the wife of Abram, gave her Egyptian maidservant to Abram for a wife! How can this be!? This all seems unthinkable to us. But it wasn't in that ancient culture. Remember, they did not have the modern options of adoption agencies or fertility doctors. In fact, we know that this practice was common in the ancient world of Abram. We even have inscriptions of law codes from surrounding nations indicating that if a woman of high standing was unable to bear children, she can use her maidservant to bear children for her. They would be legal heirs. And before you are too quick to judge them and say, "No culture could be so backward," consider how absurd our own is! It's not very common but there are surrogate mothers today. Through science they literally bear someone else's child. The only difference with Abram and Sarai is that they didn't have access to the modern methods people do today. And consider the more common practices of family planning which we have. Would Abram and Sarai ever believe that anyone would actually practice invitro fertilization? The eggs harvested from the mother are fertilized with the father's sperm in a laboratory setting. Several eggs are fertilized, and the excess life is culled. Then a few are planted back in the mother. The excess life that begins in her womb is killed off so that only one or two remain. It is essentially planned abortion, murder. Why is it done? For the same desperate reason Sarai used Hagar: family planning.

What's wrong with a little family planning? Nothing, as long as it follows God's will for marriage and honors the gift of life, and not your own ideas. Invitro fertilization, morning-after pills, and many other forms of family planning are wrong because they take a human life. In some cases they take many lives. Those practices are wrong. So was Sarai's plan. It may have been practiced by others around her, but it was still wrong. (Yes, God later gave ancient Israel other practices to ensure a family line could continue. But those practices upheld a monogamous marriage and were properly followed on the basis of willing consent by both parties. Far different from a polygamous act by a slave for her mistress.) Sarai's plan to imitate the world around her was rape at its worst and at its best forced adoption. Bottom line: it was wrong.

How could they comfortably carry out such sin? Sarai talks as if the Lord was supposed to understand because he had forced her into this position. She doesn't say, "This is the Lord's will." But notice when the Lord's name does finally get mentioned. "The Lord has kept me from having children." She's trying to make sound like God left her no choice. Does that sound familiar? When we resort to desperate measures of sin, we like to drag God into it, don't we? Many will try to blame God for the sin they dabble in. "The Lord has kept me from having the family I want, so it is okay for me to ... leave my spouse, turn to pornography, drink, abuse my children, stop going to church, sit on the couch all day and mope about it." The sinful heart pleads, "God hasn't given me what I want, so it is okay for me to sin." See the foolishness of the sinful mind? Sarai doesn't consult the Lord's will. She has her own foolish plan for her family.

Sarai might have thought her plan worked. Hagar, her maidservant, became pregnant. It was the solution for all their problems, right? Except it wasn't God's solution; it was a sinful solution. It was caving it to the unbelieving culture and practices around them. Sin is never the solution. When your relationship is struggling, when your marriage is on the rocks, when your children are out of line, when you feel like you are at your wits end, don't play the game Abram and Sarai did. They basically reasoned, "The Lord has kept me from having something, so I have to sin to get what I want." Sin only gives birth to more sin. It is never the solution to anything. It only gives birth to more problems!

Sarai's plan revealed the crumbling family. Hagar now despised Sarai. That expression might be misunderstood. It wasn't that Hagar was upset about being pregnant. The Hebrew phrase means Hagar looked down on Sarai. It literally says that Sarai began to be trivial in Hagar's eyes. Hagar began to flaunt her new position. She was now the favored

wife. You can imagine Abram being a lot more tender toward Hagar, giving her a nice place at the table, making sure she didn't have to do any menial tasks. Suddenly the maidservant from Egypt was feeling like she could be more important than her mistress. Jealousy had to already be burning in Sarai's heart over the physical side of things. Now Hagar is attacking Sarai emotionally. Sarai can't bear it.

Sin gives birth to more sin and Sarai's family further crumbled. She lashed out at her husband. "This is your fault Abram!" He's probably very frustrated. "Let me check whose idea this was in the first place." Meanwhile Sarai is using the Lord's name again. But it isn't any better than the last time she used it. First it was to blame the Lord. Now the Lord is her petty judge and poison dart to throw at Abram. "The Lord judge between you and me!" Then does Abram do the loving husband thing for either of his wives? He doesn't try to reassure Sarai of his love. Nor does he take steps to protect Hagar. He just says, "I'm not getting involved in your womanly quarrels. You handle it." Then Sarai afflicts Hagar to make her feel miserable. One of the hardest things to face is being mistreated by someone you have to get along with because they are in a position over you. One can guess that Sarai did everything she could to put Hagar back in her place as servant. She no doubt gave Hagar all the menial tasks, made her feel worthless. She tore down Hagar not physically, but by the way she spoke to her and about her. Now Hagar is going to bed in tears and waking up with a dreadful feeling of not being able to face the day. Sin leads to more sin. One sinful notion led to several broken relationships and strife.

I'm sure you can relate to the basic pattern in Sarai's heart and mind. She blamed the Lord for her problem and blamed her husband when her sinful solution didn't make her happy! Sometimes I find myself looking for my own solution to a family problem, I know that I can try to reason it out. When I blame the Lord and try to blame others instead of seeking the Lord's will, it leads to further sin. Soon my own selfish ideas come crashing down on my head. Maybe you can also relate to Abram -wanting to just step out instead of taking responsibility and helping. Maybe you've felt like Hagar. You went too far and taunted someone. Or maybe you feel afflicted and abused like she was. All families can crumble.

What ought God to do when he sees the sinful plans, the abuse, and neglect found in a crumbling home? He sees the mess we make for ourselves. He sees the response we have to challenges. He sees the times we fail to turn to him for help and turn to a sinful plan. What ought he do? Leave us in the pits we dug to reap our own reward. In the end sinful plans drag us away from our God into something worse than a crumbling family. It causes our relationship with our God to crumble and drives us to the pits of hell.

All this mess drove the pregnant Hagar to flee hundreds of miles. She was evidently making her way back to Egypt. She's probably hoping to make a living somehow. She's alone, pregnant, abused, and neglected. But there near the border of Egypt, and the brink of despair, God reveals that he has seen all that has taken place. Hagar sees the angel of the Lord who speaks to her. "Where are you going?" he asks. He already knew both her guilt and her plight -her taunting and her suffering. He knew her desperate plan to flee. But now it was time for everyone to hear God's plan. God intervenes with his direction and his undeserved blessing. "Go back and submit to her." Hagar gets to be the first one to listen to the Lord and follow his solution for this whole mess. God says she will bear the child. And she is promised that he will be blessed by him. Hagar marveled at this wonderful message and this amazing appearance.

This angel of the Lord appears and speaks in several places in Scripture. It is sometimes a title given to prophets and priests. Sometimes it is a title given to an ordinary angel sent for a special purpose. But here and in other places this angel speaks as one who is the very Word of God. Though in person differentiated from God the Father, he speaks as equal to God. This is the Lord himself, the Son who is one God with the Spirit and the Father. This is the first recorded visible appearance he gives in Scripture. He spoke to Noah, and to Abraham, but he appears first here to Hagar -the abandoned, the lonely, the outcast. He appears to one who is both the culprit and the victim -the one who taunted and who was mistreated. The Lord who saw her misery. He is with the abandoned. He comes to the outcast. And he loves the unloved. Hagar had to marvel that the unseen Lord had appeared to her in such a way and at such a time.

When the time had fully come, God's son appeared in the flesh. He came to for the abused to bring them love. He came for the neglected to bring them care. He came to take all the strife in all homes. He came to take away the division between God and all people. He did this on the cross. He himself took on flesh to be the most abused and abandoned of all time as he took our place. Far from neglecting his bride or his children, he sacrificed himself for us all! We now have his assurance of great blessing. The unseen God came to be with us and give us his love and protection!

He appeared alive again in the flesh in glory to his disciples to assure them, "Peace to you. Your sins are forgiven. Your sinful plans won't come down on your own head, because I let it all fall on mine. You are freely welcomed into the family of God." He comes to you in his Word with the same healing love and care. Though he is now unseen, he has promised, "I am with you always." So, you might face crumbling relationships, abuse, or neglect. But you know you are never alone. God, the unseen one does see. And he does care! His love and his protection are forever there!

Hagar went back. But she didn't go back alone. Like Hagar, you and I may at times face a life that is hard. It may have strife, may have its own personal challenges, even families which can crumble. But we leave today having seen the Lord who sees us. We leave here today having heard from him who loves us and brought us into a new family. In Christ we see the unseen God who cares for us. He takes the abused and neglected to be loved by him and protected.