

## Shortcuts Are Never Good Genesis 16:1-16

In the past several chapters we have seen Abram's faith, his failure, and his future. He has received a call from and a covenant by God. After his failure in Egypt he returned where his faith was rekindled, reassured, and rewarded. Last week we saw that his faith was credited to him as righteousness. Righteousness was credited to him not in what he did but in what he believed – he believed God.

Let me repeat again what I have said before that tests of faith often come after victories. **Chapter 16** is yet another test of faith, one in which he does not fair so well and one that has resulted in devastating consequences for the past 4,000 years. It really all began back in Egypt.

When we read through Israel's history in the Old Testament, we find that a number of times when they lacked faith they relied on Egypt to deliver them rather than trusting God. In a sense, every one of us has an Egypt that we rely on in times of testing rather than turning to God.

At the onset of my message I want to make something abundantly clear. If you hear nothing else from this morning, let it be this one thing, but don't nap through the rest of the message. But I do want you to catch this. Here it is: **Always trust God no matter how long the silence.**

In **chapter 15** God, who knew the mind of Abram, spoke to him and told him not to be afraid. With 318 men he had just whipped the armies of four kings and feared the possibility of being the target of retaliation. In short, he was afraid. God told him not to be afraid. That's a lesson we all need to learn that when God tells us not to be afraid – we need to listen. The words of the psalmist should encourage us today.

**Psalm 9:9-10 "The Lord is a refuge for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble. Those who know Your name will trust in You, for You, Lord, have never forsaken those who seek You."**

**Psalm 27:1, 5 "The Lord is my light and my**

**salvation – whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life – of whom shall I be afraid? ...In the day of trouble He will keep me safe in His dwelling; He will hide me in the shelter of His tabernacle and set me high upon a rock."**

**Psalm 32:7 "You are my hiding place; You will protect me from trouble and surround me with songs of deliverance."**

**Psalm 37:39 "The salvation of the righteous comes from the Lord; He is their stronghold in time of trouble."**

**Psalm 46:1 "God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, through the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging."**

**Psalm 56:3 "When I am afraid, I will trust in You. In God, whose word I praise, in God I trust; I will not be afraid. What can mortal man do to me?"**

Throughout the Word of God, the clear message of the Almighty echoes down to our day to encourage us that there is nothing to fear when we follow and obey God.

The subtle message embedded in the context of our passage is this: **Always trust God no matter how long the silence.**

**Psalm 27:14 "Wait on the Lord: be of good courage, and He shall strengthen your heart: wait, I say on the Lord."**

Charles Spurgeon writes "Let your waiting be on the Lord! He is worth waiting for. He never disappoints the waiting soul!"

It's been 10 years since Abram's call from God. He is still without the heir God promised from whom would come a vast, numberless nation. Abram is now 85 years old. We open **chapter 16** with these words: "**now Sarai, Abram's wife had born him no children**". Please allow me a little latitude in just calling her Sarah. It's easier on the tongue.

Other than the incident with Sarah in Egypt it's all been about Abram up to this point. She has remained in the shadows of her husband, but that changes here in **chapter 16**. She plays a leading role in what is about to happen. We can only assume that the promise of an heir was given to Abram who then related God's words to his wife. What we see here is that the maternal clock is ticking. If Abram is 85 that makes Sarah 75. The opening verse simply says she was barren. In what happens next, we see a house divided.

## I. A HOUSE DIVIDED CANNOT STAND – vs. 1-6

Facing a crisis in the nation over the issue of slavery, President Lincoln said in speech that a house divided against itself cannot stand.

What Sarah proposes was a plan that was adopted by Abram and once again shows a lack of faith.

### A. A Lack of Faith – vs. 1-4a

Sarah was impatient and angry with God that He didn't seem to be keeping His promise. Notice her words: **“The Lord has kept me from having children.”** Now that may be true, God may have closed her womb as He did with Rebekkah, the mother of Jacob, Hannah, the mother of Samuel, and Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist. For those who have been unable to conceive or who have had trouble getting pregnant there are a lot of anxious nights with lots of fears and tears. Over time a wave of emotions can wash over that couple wanting to have a child, but unable to. We can only imagine lots of discussions between the two of them. There were no fertility doctors or clinics, no tests to determine the cause. No answers. All they could do was cry out to God who promised. Every day, every week, every month, every year without a child it became more bleak. The fear of remaining childless in a culture that prized an heir and considered barrenness to be a tragedy, moved her to frustration, and frustration can result in bitterness, resentment and blame. And here it looks like Sarah is blaming God for her inability to become pregnant. The age of becoming incapable of having

children was drawing closer and Sarah became impatient with God.

Perhaps it was on one of those sleepless nights that she began to consider alternatives. Having lived in Ur of the Chaldeas or the Babylonian region of Mesopotamia in the southern branch of the Euphrates River, she would have been familiar with the Code of Hammurabi. He was the 6<sup>th</sup> king of the first Babylonian dynasty. This code consisted of 282 legal decisions that were collected near the end of his reign dealing with such issues as economic provisions like pricing, tariffs, trade and commerce; family issues related to marriage and divorce; criminal law that dealt with assault and theft; and civil law handling concerns like slavery and debt.

According to the laws around family and marriage it was legal for a childless woman to take her handmaid and give her as a wife to bear a child in her stead. The child would then legally belong to the first wife and become an heir of the family.

Now, maybe Sarah reasoned that God didn't specify how Abram would have a son. It wasn't supposed to be Eliezer, the servant because he wasn't born as part of Abram's seed. Maybe God meant that it didn't necessarily mean through her. So she offered her Egyptian handmaiden to Abram as a wife to see if she would bear him a son.

Listen carefully to the words of Vance Havner. Maybe you have found this to be true yourself. **“The detour is always worse than the main road.”**

Sarah wasn't sure she could fully trust God, wasn't sure He would keep good on His promise to send an heir so she took matters into her own hands. Those decisions will always catch up with us.

The name Rosie Ruiz may not mean anything to most if not any of you. She was the female winner of the 1980 Boston Marathon, that is, until suspicions grew around her staggering near record breaking time. A former marathoner interviewing her after the race noticed certain oddities. When questioned about her mile splits, Rosie didn't know what a split was. Her face wasn't flushed red from

the 26 mile, fast paced run. Her jersey wasn't drenched in sweat. After interviewing spectators, it was discovered that some remember seeing her enter from the sidewalk with about a mile to go. After further investigation it was discovered that when she ran the New York Marathon to qualify to run Boston. She was seen on a subway but explained to passengers who asked about her racing bid that she had sprained an ankle and wanted to see the finish of the race. She was disqualified, discredited and disgraced.

Shortcuts never work out, especially when God has another path He wants you to take. God was wanting this couple to put all their trust in Him and Sarah became impatient and took matters into her own hands. But perhaps what is even a sadder commentary on the whole thing is that Abram went along with the scheme. Maybe she was able to convince him that this must be what God meant when she was barren.

Kent Hughes writes "shortcuts do not promote God's purpose."

One scholar suggests that this decision may have delayed God's promise for 13 years.

If there is any encouragement or hope for us, especially when we see a patriarch like Abram falter it is found in the words of Donald Gray Barnhouse who stated that "no perfect feet walk the path of faith."

I suspect at one time or another we have all taken a shortcut and found it didn't take us where we thought it would. We can even attempt shortcuts to our faith when we try to get ahead of God. We run ahead of His plan instead of waiting on Him and it can have serious consequences.

What we see unfolding is described well by John Phillips who indicates that "a legal loophole with some worldly reasoning and a carnal desire. The result was an entanglement so snarled and so twisted that 4000 years have not unraveled it."

The question becomes this: **what you will do when your faith falters and you take a shortcut that results**

**in more pain?**

We read in **verse 4** that Abram took Sarah's advice and Hagar became pregnant.

In thinking about our passage this past week I had to ask myself a question for which I have no answers, because it is the age old question that we have all asked from time to time. **Why didn't God intervene? Why didn't He step in and stop it?** He could have. Think of all the heartache and centuries long suffering that could have been avoided and the lives saved had God reached into the corridors of time and halted this plan from hatching.

He could do that in any tragedy.

He could have kept the murder from happening  
He could have kept the robbery from happening  
He could have kept abortions from happening  
He could have kept the adultery from happening  
He could have kept the child from being molested  
or the hurricane or any number of disasters from happening

I don't want to come across as trite, but the only answer I can come up with is that God in His sovereign plan and permissive will allows those things to happen for a grander glorifying purpose. He longs for us to walk by faith, yet He knows that when we choose to follow our will we will falter. Here, their lack of faith resulted in a pregnancy that should not have happened but did. **So what happens next?** We find that there is a looming crisis.

## **B. A Looming Crisis – vs. 4b-5**

When Hagar saw she was pregnant she began to despise her mistress. Hagar became proud and looked down on Sarah with contempt. She rubbed it in Sarah's face that she was pregnant while her mistress remained barren. Maybe every day she would walk by Sarah and rub her belly and look at Sarah with haughty eyes, maybe even sneer at her. Maybe she would humiliate Sarah with a comment like, "Ooh, the baby just kicked, would you like to feel it move?" Maybe when Sarah was around Hagar would talk about picking colors for the babies room or leave the internet up with places to buy baby clothes. She despised Sarah and it caused

friction in the home. It became divisive.

The same word is used in **I Samuel 1:1-2, 6** and the same way Peninnah treated Hannah.

What a mess. The once happy home had become a hostile home.

### Proverbs 30:21-23

Sarah became indignant with Abram and blamed him for this mess. On one hand we think Sarah is at fault for suggesting it in the first place. We want to put the blame squarely in her lap. But yet, and maybe rightly so, she had a point. Maybe it was his fault. After all, he had plainly heard the promise of God but listened to Sarah. He had agreed to her suggestion rather than to trust God and say no. He could have sought God's council and determined His will, but instead Abram assumed this must be what God meant.

Sounds a bit like what happened to Israel when Joshua and the other Israelite leaders accepted the testimony of the Gibeonites who lied about where they came from and tricked them into signing a treaty when they should have been wiped out. They never sought God. Abram didn't seek God here either and Israel, indeed the world is still bearing the consequences of him listening to Sarah's tainted advice.

Notice the comparisons to the incident in the Garden of Eden.

Abram listened to Sarah just as Adam listened to Eve.

Sarah took Hagar and gave her to Abram just as Eve took the forbidden fruit and gave to Adam.

Abram willingly took Hagar from Sarah just as Adam willingly took the fruit from Eve.

And through it God remained silent.

Again from the pen of John Phillips who writes **"It is not unusual for God to be silent. Indeed, He has been silent far more than He has spoken. His silences are as eloquent as His sayings. He gave Abram a revelation of His mind and will concerning a son as heir, then He waited for faith to operate. Unfortunately with Abram, as so often with us,**

**instead of faith triumphing, the flesh triumphed instead. Sarah recommended an act of the flesh rather than faith in God."**

**James 1:8** reminds us that a double minded man is unstable in all his ways which always hinders our spiritual growth. **Romans 8:7** tells us that the sinful mind never submits to the will of God. In a moment of weakness, a moment of a lack of faith they gave in to the flesh creating a looming crisis. As a result of all the tension in this divided home we see in **verse 6** a lapse in character.

### C. A Lapse In Character – v. 6

Abram abdicated the responsibility of headship in the home and handed it to Sarah to do with Hagar as she saw fit. Perhaps Sarah went back to the familiar Code of Hammurabi for how to handle the situation. It stipulated that if a concubine had a child and claimed equality with her mistress, the mistress could demote her to the former status.

Instead of taking the high road, the godly response, Sarah chose to treat Hagar the way Hagar had treated her. The KJV says she was treated hardly or harshly. The NIV reads she was mistreated. She was rough and mean-spirited toward Hagar. It's the same word used in Exodus regarding how the Egyptians treated the Israelites.

The two people who were supposed to demonstrate godly character and point people to God, became just like those around them. What is in the heart will come out in words and actions. Squeeze a bottle of ketchup and out comes ketchup. Squeeze a tube of toothpaste and out comes toothpaste. Squeeze a heart that isn't walking in obedience and out comes the world.

Even when God is silent we have the opportunity to act spiritually. Hagar had come from a pagan culture. She should have seen and heard what godliness was to be like. When treated harshly, she did the only natural thing. We do the same thing. When problems arise, we often choose to run from them instead of staying and dealing with them. In her fleeing we note in the next section that an honor

bestowed cannot be broken.

## II. AN HONOR BESTOWED CANNOT BE BROKEN – vs. 7-14

Are we willing to trust God in His silence?  
Are we willing to obey God when He speaks?

After a time of silence, God speaks, but it is not to Abram it is to Hagar. Notice that God's pursuit is timely.

### A. God's Pursuit Is Timely – vs. 7-8

Take special notice of something important here. It is a reminder of what we read in **II Peter 3:9** that **“God is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.”**

God didn't think to Himself that He was glad she left, because He wouldn't have to clean up the mess Abram and Sarah had made. I look at Hagar as the innocent victim in all this. Hagar came from a pagan culture, a Gentile nation. What God does here shows us that His plan of redemption through the seed of Abram would be open to any who by faith come to Him. Most scholars believe that the angel of the Lord is the preincarnate Christ who has tracked her down and is now speaking to her. He found her in the desert by a spring of water in the land of Shur. This is on the doorstep of Egypt. She was returning to the only other place she knew where she thought she might receive some sympathy and be welcomed back into society albeit as a maidservant.

Now notice in **verse 8** that the Lord knew her name yet asked where she had come from and where she was headed. He really knew but wanted her to tell Him. He knew all about her problems, all about how she had been treated. God knows when we have been mistreated as well and He wants us to tell Him.

**Psalm 34:6 “This poor man cried and the Lord heard him and delivered him from all his troubles.”**

When we think we are all alone, remember that the Lord is near, that He knows, and that He cares about

what you're going through.

Johnson Oatman, a name not familiar in most Christian homes, penned a chorus that we need to stick on our bathroom mirror or car dashboard as a way of remembering an important truth when we are going through struggles in life, when situations are overwhelming, when we think we are all alone in the struggle.

Jesus knows all about our struggles;  
He will guide till the day is done.  
There's not a friend like the lowly Jesus –  
No, not one! No, not one!

Whatever the valley of the shadow of death is for you, the Lord has promised to be with you and lead you through it. Don't take His silence to be His absence or aloofness.

In the darkness and despair of a Nazis concentration camp, the words of Betsie ten Boom echo loudly through the corridors of life's deepest moments of pain and suffering. When her sister Corrie questioned the presence of God in all their suffering at the hands of the German soldiers, Betsie said **“there is no pit so deep that God isn't deeper still.”**

The Lord asked, **“Where are you going?”**  
Hagar responded, **“I'm running away.”**

His questions forced her to consider her lostness and turn her to the right path of obeying Him.

When circumstances seem so difficult that the only reasonable solution is to run away remember that God is there pursuing you to set you back on the right path. He arrived just in time and offered words of encouragement. Sometimes what He has to say or asks us to do is what we don't want to hear because it may be difficult but remember that He has our best interest at heart. In **verses 9-12** we see that God's promises are trustworthy.

### B. God's Promises Are Trustworthy – vs. 9-12

The Lord spoke to Hagar and told her to return to Sarah and submit to her. God knew how she had been mistreated but He still wanted her to go back and do the hard thing, to submit. Then He gave her

a promise. This child would also have descendants too numerous to count. He told her about the kind of man he would become, that he would be in hostility toward his brothers speaking of the descendants of Abram and Sarah.

Again from the words of John Phillips we read “[The descendants of Ishmael] remained in the background of the Bible, joining hands with Israel’s foes, found for themselves a prophet and hurled themselves like wild men against the ramparts of the world, building up a brilliant empire and spreading their creed with the sword.”

What I am about to say isn’t politically correct and some day may be considered hate speech, but it is obvious. Ravi Zacharias in a conference stated what we have heard before that nature abhors a vacuum. He used that to illustrate that what is happening in Europe with the near death of Christianity is that Muslims are sweeping in and taking over the religious stage in that part of the world. Where one religion falters another will come in and take its place. In his travels abroad he talked with many Muslims who have stated that their goal is to take over Western culture which includes our nation as well and they will do it by any means necessary and people in our nation choose, to ignore it.

The angel of the Lord looking down the corridors of time indicated that the people coming from this child would be in conflict against everyone and we are seeing that born out before our very eyes through the Islamic state.

In spite of the difficult message we read here God made a promise to Hagar that He would keep because His promise is trustworthy. What we need to keep in mind is that this is all part of His grand sovereign plan for the ages.

Hagar’s response about the Lord is seen in **verses 13-14**. God’s presence is treasured.

### C. God’s Presence Is Treasured – vs. 13-14

Hagar’s response indicates her faith. This is the only time a woman gives a name to God. It is the

name El Roi and means the God who sees. She had personally come to know God as the one who saw her and knew everything about her. Back in **verse 11** she was to give the child the name Ishmael which means God shall hear or God has heard. The tense of **verse 13** indicates a step of faith in which she believed God and would remain in His grace.

**Is that how you see God? Do you understand and believe that He knows everything about you, that He knows all about your troubles?**

**Psalm 34:6-8 “This poor man called, and the Lord heard him; He saved him out of all his troubles. The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear Him, and He delivers them. Taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the man who takes refuge in Him.”**

**Do we miss the treasure of God’s presence because we fail to remember that the all-knowing, all-seeing God is with us everywhere we go?**

Whether it is in the life of Hagar here or in the lives of Abram and Sarah, the words of Corrie ten Boom are paramount for a walk of faith. **“Never be afraid to trust an unknown future to a known God.”**

For a decade God had been silent, but was a time to continue to trust God’s promises. I have said before His silence does not mean His absence. So when He is silent shortcuts are never good, but they are never roadblocks for what He wants to accomplish.

Hagar was to return as we see in **verses 15-16**. These verses show us that a humble response cannot be ignored.

### III.A HUMBLE RESPONSE CANNOT BE IGNORED – vs. 15-16

A test of faith is our willing obedience to the will of God no matter how difficult the circumstances. She didn’t know what kind of reception she would get when she returned back to the tents of Abram and Sarah, but she demonstrated her faith by obeying the command of God to return and submit to Sarah. I think when she returned she told Abram and Sarah about her encounter with God. Her humility is twofold.

**A. Humility is seen in her submissive nature –****v. 15****B. Humility is seen in her son's name – v. 16**

She did what the Lord said by returning and she did what the Lord said in naming her son. Every time she called his name it would be a reminder of her encounter with God by a well of water in the desert where she learned that God both hears and sees her. That is faith.

In closing let me make a couple observations I hope will encourage your faith today.

1. A walk of faith is willing to wait for God, even when He is silent.
2. A walk of faith is always obedient to God to do what He says.
3. A walk of faith will always result in the peace of God because he waits in patience.

**James 1:2-4**

The person who walks and waits in faith will never be disappointed. It never pays to take shortcuts. Always trust God no matter how long the silence.