

Part 17: Our Problems and God's Promise

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Any preacher or Bible study leader knows that some passages of scripture are more difficult than others. Sometimes that's because the text itself is difficult to follow, sometimes it's because the truths presented in it are hard to wrap our minds around, and sometimes it's because it touches on hot button issues both in our own lives and in our current moment in culture.

Our passage today is Genesis 16 and it manages to check all of these boxes. To understand this passage you not only have to deal with the context and culture of Abram's day, but you've got to take into consideration how the New Testament authors deal with the interpretation of this passage. But you've also got difficult truths in here that connect to the realities of sin, suffering and God's sovereignty. It deals with hot button issues like marriage, infertility, infidelity, bitterness, pride, abuse, and political realities played out even today over land rights in the Middle East.

This passage presents a lot of problems. But that's why it's such good news for those who often feel their lives are filled with problems. What's wrong, what's right, and what in the world is going on? The life and lives of these individuals is a hot mess. But even the hottest of all messes can be straightened out by a God who keeps his promises. The title of our sermon today is "God's Promise and Our Problems."

Life's pain points are often very clear. We will encounter problems. But if we want to make it through, we've got to learn to see God's promise when it seems all we see are big problems. Our big idea this morning is this: **When all you see are problems, trust the God who sees you.** We will see this in three points: **Real Difficulties and Distorted Thoughts, Distorted Solutions and Real Problems,** and lastly **Finally Seeing and Truly Seen.**

Remember one of the big themes in the book of Genesis is how God is helping us see things differently. In the Garden we saw things how God saw them: what he saw as good, we saw as good. But the serpent deceived us into seeing the same things but deciding for ourselves whether what we see is good or bad.

Having lost God's perspective, we are no longer trustworthy interpreters of what we see. We invent dangers when there are none, and we miss opportunities when they are there. If you follow sports you may remember Sam Darnold, a high draft pick who struggled mightily at quarterback. After throwing four interceptions in one game, he was asked why he struggled so much. He famously replied, "I don't know. It's like I'm seeing ghosts."

The NFL was hard—but it's even harder when you're inventing defenders that aren't really there. Living in light of God's promise is hard. But it's even harder when we invent problems and inflate challenges to be bigger than they actually are.

This is what leads us to our first point this morning in Genesis 16: **Real Difficulties and Distorted Thoughts.**

Notice how the story opens: **Genesis 16:1-2a**, “Now Sarai, Abram’s wife, had borne him no children. She had a female Egyptian servant whose name was Hagar. And Sarai said to Abram, “Behold now, the Lord has prevented me from bearing children.”

Here’s the difficulty Abram and his wife Sarai face: Five times now the Lord has promised Abram and Sarai that they would conceive with a child yet they are not pregnant. The facts are clear to Sarai: God said yet I do not have.

Last week the Lord drew out of Abram these same concerns which modeled for us what faithful doubting looks like. It’s the speed at which Abram moves from faithful trusting to sinful distrust which should shock us.

But, any Christian knows that this is not a them problem, it’s an us problem. We know what it’s like to stand firm amidst the storm of doubt and sin one day, only to find ourselves collapsing like a house of cards at the slightest breeze of difficulty the next.

Why and how does this happen? When all we see are our problems, it tends to distort everything else. Notice how this passage models for us four ways Sarai’s view of her barrenness caused her to have a distorted view on other things.

First, beware of a *distorted view of God’s character*.

Notice how the subject of Sarai’s complaint is rooted in a right view of God’s sovereignty but a wrong view of God’s charity. “The Lord has prevented me from bearing children.”

She rightly identified two things: she is barren, and God is sovereign over the womb. Yet, what follows in this story makes it clear that she believes her empty womb is a sign of God’s empty heart. It was a common belief among the Lord’s people in the Old Testament that barrenness was a sign of the Lord’s judgement. This is what Sarai assumed. The Lord was displeased, disinterested, or perhaps even devious—making a promise to her that she was unable to fulfill.

But a survey of the Bible shows us that what men generally viewed as God’s punishment—God displayed his power in. Generally when we meet a barren woman in scripture it is the very means by which God is going to shame the wisdom and power of the world by bringing about a blessing through that very barrenness.

Barrenness is a difficulty. It is a real pain. But barrenness is no sign of God’s disposition towards you. Barrenness is no sign of God’s displeasure towards you. The difficulties we face in the flesh are no indication that God is not working in your life or that he has forgotten you.

The Puritan Timothy Rogers who suffered mightily with depression once said this of those in suffering: “You must know that we are very ingenious in heightening every [difficult] thing. Sufferers are capable of magnifying their fears and concluding that God is against them.”

But Sarai did with her barrenness what we often do with all our problems. We deify our problems and diminish God’s promise. Instead of putting her barrenness in submission to God’s promise—she placed God’s promise in submission to her barrenness. She treated her problem as if it were a sovereign reality and saw her God as a problem that needed to be addressed.

Temporary difficulties are real problems to us. But we must remember they are not problems to God. Lord was for Sarai. The Lord would bring her a child. And while he doesn't make such direct promises to all of us in the face of our own difficulties—he does remind us that we lack no good thing in the promise of Jesus. We might face difficulties here. But when it comes to trusting in the God who calls us to himself—we look at our difficulties for what they are, and without diminishing the pain, and we say, “this is no problem for the God who gave himself for me.” A false perspective on our difficulties almost always begins when we allow ourselves a false perspective on the heart of the Father who did not even withhold his own son from us. Will he not also, in his timing, and finally in his kingdom, graciously give us all things.

Second, beware of how our problems cause a *distorted view of God's timing*.

Google recently conducted an internal survey of its ability to quickly load shopping pages online. It discovered that a delay of five tenths of a second would decrease web traffic by 20 percent. We hate waiting. We especially hate waiting when we've been promised a good or a service.

Sarai and Abram have been waiting far longer than half a second. If you glance down at **Genesis 16:3**, you'll see that it has been ten years now since Abram and Sarai trusted the Lord and moved into the land.

Ten years, and maybe God forgot. Ten years, and maybe I need to look somewhere else. But the history of God's promise is a history of waiting on God's timing. Watch what will happen as Sarai refuses to wait. See the problems that Israel encountered when they rushed to make Saul king. Notice the confusion even the disciples had when they assumed the kingdom of God was going to be established immediately by Jesus. Waiting is hard—but it's a bit easier when we are waiting on the Lord.

Hope deferred can make the heart sick—but hope endured can keep the heart safe. Don't limit God's timing by your false timelines. Peter reminds us, “The Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgement.”

Third, beware of a *distorted view of necessary opportunity*:

Look back at what happened in **Genesis 16:1-2**. Abram's wife was Sarai. Sarai was barren and bore no children. Sarai knows that the Lord's promise required Abram to have children and yet the Lord prevented her. But, the Lord also delivered Abram and Sarai out of Egypt, and he blessed them when he did so, giving them people and possessions. One of those servants Pharaoh gave Sarai was young, healthy, and well within her child bearing years. Her name, was Hagar.

If the Lord knew Abram needed a child—and Sarai couldn't conceive—why then would he give Sarai a maidservant that seems like a perfect way to overcome this difficulty. We will talk more about this practice in a moment—but notice how our problems often cause us to find sinful opportunities and baptize them as godly necessities.

If God delights in two people getting married, and if I'm having trouble finding a man who loves Jesus, why then would God allow this unbelieving co-worker, who is so kind and gentle to be so interested in me. Look, here's Hagar. If God desires for me to be generous to missions, then why would he give me this high paying job even though it might consistently cause me anxiety and pull me further from my

family and my church. Look, here's Hagar. The Lord doesn't want me to be legalistic, and he has made wine to gladden the heart, why not celebrate my freedom in Christ and be gladdened deeply by drinking deeply. Look, here's Hagar.

Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. And he often baits his hook with the meat of God's promise. He lures us into sin in order to get what we can only receive by grace. The Lord doesn't need your sinful opportunities in order to keep his incredible promises. Don't be opportunistic with sin thinking it's making you fortunate with God's promise.

And lastly, beware of a *distorted view of what's right and what's wrong*.

When God defined marriage in Genesis 1 and 2 as being between one man and one woman—he meant it. Which means that what Sarai, Abram, and Hagar were agreeing to is nothing short of sinful adultery. But notice how Sarai didn't necessarily think it was. She gave Hagar to Abram, "as a wife."

We know that is not true, and never does Moses refer to Hagar as Abram's wife. Why then did she feel like she should do this? Because it was culturally normal and acceptable at the time. When faith seems difficult we often find refuge in what culture says is an easy solution.

This practice of a barren matron providing a maidservant to her husband was not only a common practice—it was so common that we have historic evidence of it being legally protected and regulated in numerous ancient cultures. Where we might be tempted to see this as abusive or destructive according to our culture—according to their culture it was normative and it was even beneficial to all parties involved.

Sarai was really able to convince herself that this was God's will because culture itself said that it was normal and good. We don't read of Hagar protesting, nor of Abram. In fact, there was possibly cultural pressure for Sarai to do this.

But we do not let culture's norms rewrite creative norms. This was evil even if it was encouraged. It was detestable even if it was culturally acceptable. Sinning against God's design is always a moral issue because humans sin. If sin didn't hurt us, God would not care as much. But sin hurts us, and it hurts others.

Every culture has had times where it seeks to ease the tension of waiting on God's promise by presenting refuge in what culture says brings relief. We will adopt their view of right and wrong, their view of marriage and sexuality, their view of love and justice. But just as we might look back at this practice as barbaric and abusive—so too will history look back at those who find hope in the inhumane approvals we quickly adopt in our own day.

We will face real difficulties in life—but if we allow those difficulties to reframe what we think about God, his timing, his sovereignty, and his revealed will—we will never have an accurate view of how we should respond.

Sin never solves anything. Sin never loves anyone. Sin never leads us further in the promise of God.

Here's our second point, which we will touch on very quickly: **Distorted Solutions and Real Problems**.

Despite the mutual agreement wherein all their problems would be solved, look at the fallout: **Genesis 16:4-6**, “And he went in to Hagar, and she conceived. And when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress. And Sarai said to Abram, “May the wrong done to me be on you! I gave my servant to your embrace, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt. May the Lord judge between you and me!” But Abram said to Sarai, “Behold, your servant is in your power; do to her as you please.” Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she fled from her.”

False solutions to real difficulties never produce the results we want. Sin never leads to less suffering. Running from the God of promise never leads to the relief which is only in God’s promise. This is why we are encouraged to lean not on our own understanding, but in all our ways acknowledge him.

If it was harder for Sarai to trust God before—it seemed even harder now. Everything was not easier because of sin. It didn’t bring peace, and it won’t bring it to you either. Notice, the three-fold responses of sin often produces in our lives.

Sarai is frustrated with Hagar and Hagar is frustrated with Sarai. Just Hagar looked with contempt on Sarai, and Sarai felt the arrogance of Hagar. We don’t actually know if there was a real problem between the two or if it was just perception—but notice how it didn’t lead them to love one another more. Sin frustrated relationships, always.

Abram is fatigued at the whole thing. He capitulated to Sarai, he was all too eager to give this a go, and yet when his wife and his mistress were now fighting—Sarai passed the buck to Abram, and Abram passed the buck back to Sarai. If they didn’t know what to do then, they definitely didn’t now. And chasing sin will fatigue your desire to obey and will cloud any sense of clarity you might have.

Lastly, Hagar fled. She fled because Abram so quickly surrendered the care and protection that ought to accompany sexual intimacy and parenthood. She fled because her mistress Sarai, now having the power, abused her and mistreated her out of petty jealousy. Sin is dangerous, and sin makes us run and flee to wherever or whatever we think might help us.

Might we see the pattern here so we might see the patterns in our own life. When we try to solve problems on our own, we make problems we never had. This passage is nothing more than another rerun of the show we all hate to watch. It was in Eden that a passive Adam obeyed the voice of his wife who spoke contrary to God’s command. It was in Eden where immediately after sin, everyone threw everyone under the bus and pointed fingers at everyone else. It was in Egypt where Abram sinfully gave his wife to Pharaoh to preserve God’s promise, and here it is the wife that the Lord delivered from Pharaoh who now gives an Egyptian woman to her husband as a wife in order to preserve God’s promise.

Those who won’t learn from history’s mistakes are destined to repeat them. We have. And we will. Our sin isolates us from the God of promise, strains human relationships, harms others, endangers ourselves, and causes us to want to flee for our own safety. A life of sin is a life that Paul warned us of in Galatians: But if you bite and devour one another watch out that you are not consumed by one another.

When we make mistakes, when we are sinned against, we feel more isolated, more alone and with bigger problems than when we first started. It might seem like no one sees you, and no one cares. But that’s the beauty of this story. And it’s what we turn to in conclusion.

Here’s our final point: **Finally Seeing and Truly Seen.**

Read with me: **Genesis 16:7-12**, “The angel of the Lord found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur. And he said, “Hagar, servant of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?” She said, “I am fleeing from my mistress Sarai.” The angel of the Lord said to her, “Return to your mistress and submit to her.” The angel of the Lord also said to her, “I will surely multiply your offspring so that they cannot be numbered for multitude.” And the angel of the Lord said to her, “Behold, you are pregnant and shall bear a son. You shall call his name Ishmael, because the Lord has listened to your affliction. He shall be a wild donkey of a man, his hand against everyone and everyone’s hand against him, and he shall dwell over against all his kinsmen.”

We have read of the Lord speaking or appearing before in Genesis. But, there are times where the Lord not only speaks, nor where the Lord is seen in a vision, but when the Lord speaks and is really present in a unique way. This is indicated to us in this phrase: “The angel of the Lord.”

The angel of the Lord is the presence of the Lord himself. The Trine God, Father, Son, and Spirit have no bodily form. Not until Jesus would become incarnate would he have a physical body. So the angel of the Lord is the Old Testament’s way of communicating the incommunicable. The presence of God speaking, dwelling, standing with the people to whom he’s speaking.

And here is something absolutely amazing. The very first time the angel of the Lord appears is here in Genesis 16. And he didn’t go to Abram, he didn’t go to Sarai, he didn’t go to Noah, or Enoch, he came to this Egyptian maidservant who was both a sinner and a sufferer. But he speaks to her, he draws near to her and asks her what God already knows.

“Where are you coming from and where are you going?” That’s how God meets most of us. It’s in moments when the answers are obvious that we realize our hope isn’t. She knew what she’s running from: a big problem back with Sarai. She knows what she’s running to: She’s headed back to Egypt.

But the Lord wants to help us see that where we think we might need to be isn’t the same as where we ought to be. When we feel like running from our problems, the Lord wants to help us run to his promise.

In fact, the Lord sends her back to Abram and Sarai. That’s absolutely preposterous! Sarai, who had the promise of God, struggled to believe God in light of what wasn’t there: a child. But here, the Lord appears to Hagar and sends her back into a situation where what she feared was there: Sarai and the awkward nature of sinful dysfunction.

But he not only sends her back, he gives her a posture. Submission. That’s a dangerous word for anyone who is suffering. One quick aside, don’t take this to mean that abused people must return and submit to their abusers. That is not the cultural context of what is going on. Remember this is a particular person, to whom God is giving a particular command, to go back to a particular person, with whom there is a particular promise.

And yet a general principle can be applied here that the only way we can endure our problems is not by running away from them, but by submitting to the Lord even inside of them. Here, this Egyptian woman is going to go back. Her response to go back doesn’t display a woman who is terrified and victimized. Instead we see a bold and courageous woman of faith. This is not weakness, this is no passivity. This is

no apathetic concession to life's misery. This is an active, walking, working, enduring, and conquering display of faith.

But how and why would she do this? For two reasons.

The first is that she herself was given a promise regarding her son. Though Abram didn't seem to care for Hagar or her child, the Lord would. Where we see problems, the Lord sees people. This son was Abram's son even though Abram acted in sin. And though this was not the child of faith, or the child of promise, God graciously gave a promise that was nearly just as big as the one he gave to Abram.

Ishmael, Hagar's son would produce a multitude in the same manner as Sarai's son would. He would have success, he would live in conflict with others, and yet he would seemingly have victory over others. Let this be a reminder to us though that as good as this promise was—it was not the promise God gave Abram. By worldly metrics this is what we want, power and posterity. But the power and posterity of man without the promise of blessing in God means nothing. Worldly success is no substitute for God's saving promise.

As it relates to our modern world, it is the Arabs who claim Ishmael as their patriarch, and the Jews who claim Isaac. Notice how God's promise to Ishmael includes tension and battle. This explains much of the constant unrest between nations like Palestine and Israel. It is there because the Lord has placed it there.

Peace on earth, and peace in the middle east should be actively sought in every political and personal way. But ultimate peace, the peace of the promise comes only when God makes all things new in Christ's return. There, in that heavenly Jerusalem we beat our swords into plows, and we turn our weapons into friendship bracelets.

If there's going to be peace, it's in God's promise. A promise made here to Abram, but one made earlier to Shem, and then Noah, and ultimately to Adam and Eve. A promise of the world finding it's rest and relief in the promised seed of Eve. As Paul reminds us in **Romans 10:12-13**, "For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

I don't claim to know what fixes things now in the middle east. Or what fixes things now even in our own political problems. But here's what we know—it will only be fixed finally in Jesus Christ. Those Arabs, if they want the promise of God, must come to it by faith in Jesus Christ. And we should labor to take that message to them even though they are marked by violent resistance. But so too if the Jews are going to be saved, it will be by the promise of God which is faith in Jesus Christ. And we should take it to them even though they are marked by a spiritual resistance to the Lord.

And if you will be saved, it is here. And here's why you should have confidence. Here's why this should change how you see everything. Look at what happens in **Genesis 16:13-14**, "So she called the name of the Lord who spoke to her, "You are a God of seeing," for she said, "Truly here I have seen him who looks after me." Therefore the well was called Beer-lahai-roi; it lies between Kadesh and Bered."

If you have your Bible I want you to look back up and notice how Abram and Sarai address Hagar. Whenever they speak of her she is only "the servant." But look now at verse 8 and notice how God addresses her, "Hagar."

He knows her name. He sees her. He listens to her. The name Ishmael means "Yahweh hears," and the Lord didn't hear her audible cry—he listened to her affliction. He knew what she felt. He knew her pain. And she knew that he knew.

Never in her whole life had she been seen like this. Never had she so fully known that she was known. That's why she gives God a name—the only woman in the whole Bible who ever did this. And that name is "You are a God of Seeing." She named the well she was at "Truly I have seen him who looks after me."

What's lost on us in English is that the weight of that sentence is on Hagar. Hagar is willing to go back to a difficult situation, she's willing to go back where she's got no clear answers. She's willing to move into a place that she will be uncomfortable. But she's doing it because this great covenant-keeping, affliction-hearing God sees *her*. Brothers and sisters, the Lord sees you. The Lord. The creator of heaven and earth. The one who gave the promise to Abram, and who fulfilled it in himself in Jesus Christ, he sees you.

Timothy Rogers again says this: "Though he is very high, he doesn't think it below him to regard the most troubled and sorrowful believer. On earth he was acquainted with grief. His own experience renders him more capable of helping us; and it makes him full of pity when he sees us mourn."

Life is messy. We've got problems. And sometimes our problems create more problems when we attempt to solve them by sin. But we have a God who sees us. Jesus entered into our problems. And he trusted God faithfully. His vision was never distorted though his body was. Bruised, punctured and torn he went to the cross for all to see, so that when all we see is difficulty—we can see the promise of God that stands out for us in Jesus. Trust in him. He sees your problems because he sees you. He knows you, and he reminds us that God is faithful.

Would you see your problems in light of his promise? Would you see that there is no problem bigger than Jesus. No culture more compassionate than Christ. And no wound we receive here which will not be gloriously soothed in heaven.