

If you have your Bible, turn with me to Genesis 16. As you are turning there, I want you to think about a universal experience we have all had at one time or another: we've watched events unfold and thought to ourselves, "Life seems so unfair." You applied for a promotion at work, and even though you were unquestionably more qualified, someone else was given the job. Someone falsely accused you of something you didn't do, and your name was dragged through the mud. Someone you were in a relationship with was unfaithful to you. All your friends had stable families when you were growing up, but your parents divorced and you barely saw your dad again. All your peers have been able to have kids without effort. You've had disappointment for decades. Whether it's something someone you know has gone through, something you've experienced in the past, or something you are going through right now, we can't help but observe that at times life seems so unfair. That's what is happening in Genesis 16, our passage today. As we read Genesis 16, this is the question that leaps off the page: How do we respond when life seems unfair?

It's easy to trust God and be joyful when life is good! When you have your dream job, your dream family, your dream friendship, your dream financial situation, your dream retirement, when life is 75 and sunny, you look around and say, "God, I love you. God, I trust you. God, I thank you!" But what happens when that dream turns into a nightmare and that sunny sky turns pitch dark and we end up in a very real crisis of faith? How do we respond then? That's where we are in Genesis 16.

Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. But she had an Egyptian slave named Hagar; so she said to Abram, "The Lord has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my slave; perhaps I can build a family through her." Abram agreed to what Sarai said. So after Abram had been living in Canaan ten years, Sarai his wife took her Egyptian slave Hagar and gave her to her husband to be his wife. He slept with Hagar, and she conceived. (Genesis 16:1-4)

For Sarai and Abram, life seemed unfair. Remember that earlier in their life, God spoke to them and called them to step out in faith, leave their family and their homeland, and set out on a 1,000-mile-long journey to an unknown location. God promised them that they would have a child, and that through that child, he would one day bless the entire world. They kept their end of the bargain and did what God called them to do, but how long had it been? They went ten years without a child. Life seemed incredibly unfair. In their minds, their sense of value, self-worth, future, security, and legacy were all entirely wrapped up in the ability to have children. Sarai attributed her inability to have children to God: "The Lord has kept me from having children." She recognized that her life was hard and seemed unfair, and she blamed God, accusing him of being the reason her life was hard.

So Sarai said to her husband, "Go, sleep with my slave; perhaps I can build a family through her." This seems very unusual and of course incredibly inappropriate to us, but this was a very common and culturally acceptable practice in that day. If you couldn't have a child, you could have another person have a child for you, and then raise that child as your own. This is the epitome of taking matters into your own hands. It's the picture of God sitting down at a desk and writing out an incredible story for your life, but you think that it's taking too long for God to write the story that you want, so you push him aside, steal the pen out of his hand, and start scribbling down the story you want as fast as you can. That never works out well.

Sarai pitched her impatient, faithless plan to Abram and he agreed. There are so many lessons and applications we could make from this part of the story, but what really stands out to me is that we have a

replay of the Garden of Eden. In Genesis 3, Eve was tempted to not trust God, to reach out and take something that God had restricted. After being deceived, she went to her husband, shared the idea, and recruited him to join her foolish plan. Here we have the same strategy unfolding again. Sarai is tempted. Sarai doesn't trust God. Sarai is deceived. She goes to her husband, pitches the foolish idea as if it's a really good idea, and he goes right along with it. Passivity. Cowardice. Weakness. No vision. No conviction. No leadership. No backbone. No strength. He abdicated the leadership of his household to his depressed, discontented, and spiritually disoriented wife, and ended up facilitating a catastrophe. Instead of loving her, leading her, praying for her, protecting her, grounding her, and pointing her to the goodness of God, he facilitated her sin and followed her right into it. Every marriage, every household, needs a godly, strong, righteous, faith-filled leader. Without such a leader, we're likely to veer off course. That's the very thing that happened in Sarai and Abram's lives.

But the focus of this story isn't just on Abram and Sarai and their lack of faith; it's also on Hagar, the slave woman that Abram slept with. Things may have seemed unfair for Abram and Sarai, but life was much more unfair for Hagar.

- She was a slave.
- She was forced into a loveless marriage.
- She was made to conceive / carry / raise a child for another woman.

Given our cultural experience, it would be nearly impossible for any of us to imagine the lack of autonomy, the pain, the challenge, the difficulty she had to endure. All that injustice boiled up in her to become resentment and pride. "When Hagar knew she was pregnant, she began to despise her mistress." The word translated "despise" means to look down upon, to think lowly of. We have a reversal of power dynamics in the household. In the ancient world, a woman's value and worth was often tied to her fertility and ability to have children. Now Hagar saw herself as honorable and Sarai as contemptible. In ways that my wife Keren has told me women have the unique ability to do—through glares, stares, subtle remarks, and insinuations—Hagar began to make Sarai feel unwelcome in her own home. Hagar was both a victim and a villain. She went from being innocent to being an instigator.

As unfair as life felt to Sarai before, it felt even more unfair to her now! "Then Sarai said to Abram, 'You are responsible for the wrong I am suffering. I put my slave in your arms, and now that she knows she is pregnant, she despises me. May the Lord judge between you and me'" (Genesis 16:5). The fallout was severe. Sarai faced the unintended consequences of disobeying God. Her plan made such perfect sense to her when it was in her mind, but when she followed through with it, it led to even more pain. But instead of taking responsibility and ownership, she pointed her finger at her husband and blamed him. "This is all your fault. You're responsible." She even invoked God's name and said God would judge. What we see in Sarai is a near universal principle in all humanity. When we are hurt and sad because our own sinful plans backfire on us, instead of looking at the mirror and taking responsibility, repenting, and seeking reconciliation, we point the finger and blame others. This is a key point: Self-deception almost always results in self-righteousness. We refuse to take ownership. We convince ourselves others are to blame and we are completely innocent, and we are so sure we think we want God himself to come and vindicate us!

Surely at this moment, Abram, this man of faith, decided to step up and lead well? Not so much. "'Your slave is in your hands,' Abram said. 'Do with her whatever you think best'" (Genesis 16:6). Passivity, laziness, and going along with a faithless plan was what got their family into this mess in the first place, and rather than correcting course and leaning in, Abram said to his wife, "Keep doing whatever you want. That sounds like a good plan of action." Total conflict avoidance and cowardice.

We move from life feeling unfair for this couple to life being very unfair for Hagar. “Then Sarai mistreated Hagar.” The Hebrew word translated “mistreated” is *’anah*, and it means emotional humiliation and physical oppression. This is the same word that was used to describe the Egyptian slave masters oppressing and causing misery on their subjects. That’s what Sarai did to this pregnant woman. The situation in the home got so bad that Hagar “fled from (Sarai).” She literally ran away. Because she was an Egyptian, she ran in the direction she knew—south—for 70-100 miles across the scorching sand in the barren wilderness. Try to enter her situation. She was pregnant, feeling used and abused, powerless, on the run, discouraged, exhausted, feeling all alone. Right at that place of desperation, God met her. “The angel of the Lord found Hagar near a spring in the desert; it was the spring that is beside the road to Shur. And he said, ‘Hagar, slave of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going?’” (Genesis 16:7-8). God pursued her. This is the first time in the Bible that God addressed a woman by name. He asked her to give account of her situation in life and her plans. She answered honestly: “I’m running away from my mistress Sarai.” In other words, “My life has been really unfair, so I had to get out of there. I took matters into my own hands and left!”

“Then the angel of the Lord told her, ‘Go back to your mistress and submit to her’” (Genesis 16:9). God said, “I know life is hard. I know it seems unfair, but I have a plan. My plan isn’t to remove the difficulty from your life, but to meet you in that difficulty and even work through that difficulty to change the world.” God didn’t tell Hagar to grin and bear it; he told her he had a plan for her life! “The angel added, ‘I will increase your descendants so much that they will be too numerous to count’” (Genesis 16:10). Hagar’s son went on to have twelve sons and became the father of modern-day Arab ethnicities. Hagar would become, through this son of hers, the biological mother of hundreds and hundreds of millions of people who are alive today.

“The angel of the Lord also said to her: ‘You are now pregnant and you will give birth to a son. You shall name him Ishmael, for the Lord has heard of your misery’” (Genesis 16:11). The name “Ishmael” is a compound word: “Yishma” means “he hears,” “el” means “God,” so “Ishmael” means “God hears.” Hagar took such deep encouragement that God was with her there in that moment that she not only named her son, “God hears,” but then she also took the bold and audacious step to name God. She named her son, “God hears,” then she wanted to give God a name, too. She was the first person in the Bible to give God a name. Not Adam, not Noah, not Abram. The first person in the Bible to give God a personal name was a marginalized slave woman from Egypt. “She gave this name to the Lord who spoke to her: ‘You are the God who sees me’” (Genesis 16:13). You are the God who sees me—*el roi* in Hebrew. God not only hears, but he also sees. Hagar felt all alone, like no one in the world understood her or cared for her. She was in the middle of a barren wilderness, isolated and desperate. Then she looked up and saw that she was not alone; God was with her. God saw her. God cared. God would not abandon her or leave her stranded. She went on to say: “‘I have now seen the One who sees me’” (Genesis 16:13). God saw me, and now I have seen him. There is a familiarity, a personalness, an intimacy to this interaction that is so inspiring to me.

We began today with a question: how do we respond when life seems unfair? Through this story, we see two ways not to respond and one way to respond! Here’s the first way not to respond: Don’t try to solve the problem by using culturally acceptable practices that are outside of God’s plan. That’s what Abram and Sarai did. Life didn’t seem fair to them. Late in life, no kids, God seemingly wasn’t keeping his promises, their plans weren’t coming together, their dreams weren’t becoming reality, so even though deep down they knew it wasn’t right, they turned a servant girl into a surrogate wife, taking matters into their own hands, saying, “If we can’t get what we want the right way, we’ll find another way.” How often do we do this, too?

- It doesn't seem fair to us that we don't have as much money as we think we should. What are culturally acceptable ways to get more money? We live on credit card debt to finance a lifestyle we can't afford. We gamble a little bit, hoping to hit it big. We fudge on taxes a little bit. We become a taker rather than a giver in our relationships. That's not what God wants.
- It doesn't seem fair to us that we haven't been able to find a Christian spouse, so we begin lowering our standards and dating non-believers or pursuing false intimacy through pornography or other digital engagement.

We could think of so many other examples. Is there any area in your life right now where, because you haven't received what you want, when you want it, you are taking matters into your own hands, and saying, "This is how everyone else is getting what they want, so rather than trusting God's way and God's timing, I'm going to do it on my own"?

Here's a second way not to respond: Don't try to run away from your problems and assume you are all alone. That's what Hagar did. Some people, rather than choosing unwise ways to solve the problem, chose unwise ways to cope with the problem. They aren't going out and proactively making destructive choices; they begin to believe destructive lies. Instead of turning to trustworthy people for help, instead of turning to God for help, they turn inward and believe they are all alone and there is no hope, only despair. They shut people out, they turn to self-harm, they turn to drugs, alcohol or other substances, they even consider taking their own life. I met with a family last week whose child took his own life. We can do the most extreme things when we feel hopeless and alone. You are not alone, and you are not without hope! You have a family who loves you. You have friends who love you. This church loves you. I love you. God loves you. Don't turn inward. Don't turn to substances. Don't turn to self-harm. Reach out and receive the love that is there!

We see what *not* to do from each of the people in this story, but we also see what we should do: Trust that God hears you, sees you, and not only has a good plan for your life, but also has a good plan for this part of your life. After God met with Hagar, she was able to say, "God has heard my cries. God has seen my pain. God knows. God understands. God cares." God has also come near to us, and he promises to work all things together for the good. When Joseph was rejected by his brothers, beaten, sold into slavery, falsely accused, and forgotten in prison, there was so much he could have been angry and upset about because of how unfair life was. But he said to his brothers, the very ones who abused him and set him on that trajectory, "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives" (Genesis 50:20). And remember what Paul said in Romans 8:28: "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." God has a plan. He sees you, he hears you, and he has the desire to work even this season of pain you are in right now for the good!

This passage has deep personal significance to me because of my mom, who went to be with the Lord about two and a half years ago. My mom was a woman of deep and incredible faith. She had so much joy and enthusiasm for every day of life. Because she was so joyful and so enthusiastic, it came as a surprise to people when they got to know her better and learned all the hardships she had gone through in life. When she was a teenager, one of her brothers died unexpectedly. When she was in her young twenties, her mother died. She had a difficult marriage that led to numerous separations and then a divorce, so she raised five kids nearly on her own for many years, working multiple very difficult jobs. She went through a bankruptcy through no fault of her own and a foreclosure through no fault of her own. She paid off \$100,000 of someone else's debt. One of her kids went down the wrong road and ended up living on the streets with heavy substance addiction. My mom endured so much difficulty, so much hardship and heartbreak. After she passed away, I was going through her belongings and I opened her Bible. My mom marked up her Bible, writing notes and underlining all over the place. When I came to this passage, Genesis 16, I saw she had it

marked up more than anywhere else. “God sees me. I am not alone, God is with me. I am not without help, God is for me. He is on my side, and he will work all things together for the good.”

I spoke from this passage at my mom’s funeral. Because my mom was able to say her entire life, “I have a God who sees me,” and because of what Jesus has done, she now sees the one who saw her. Anyone here who has placed their faith in Jesus, who decides today to place their faith in Jesus, has the same confidence. God sees you where you are. And one day, because God himself went to the cross for us, when our troubles in this life are over, we will be able to see him, too.

If you are here today and you are feeling that life is unfair—if your spouse was unfaithful or left, if your grown kids have shut the door on a relationship with you, if your employer has mistreated you, if you’ve been diagnosed with cancer and have a make or break surgery coming up in a few weeks—know that God sees you, and one day, because of Jesus, you will be able to see him, too. Even today, he hears you, he cares, he has drawn near to you, and he has a good plan for this season of your life.