

Solving God's Problems

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[0 : 0 0] to judge people. We judge Sarai for using her slave as a surrogate. We judge Abram for sleeping with Hagar. We judge Hagar for despising Sarai. We judge Sarai for mistreating Hagar and we judge Ishmael for being a hostile person. Moses encourages the readers of Genesis to judge Abram and Sarai but perhaps not for those particular actions. Their moral failures are not the main message. The author is making a bigger point. Moses wants us to see that God's plan is so comprehensive that it accommodates our plans. That is, even when we do the wrong thing and lack faith, God's plan for salvation of the world still moves forward and achieves its purposes.

To make this point about God's salvation plan, Moses used an interesting technique. He repeated the pattern from the story of Adam and Eve.

Eve spoke. Sarai spoke. Adam listened to Eve. Abram listened to Sarai. Eve took some fruit. Sarai took the slave. Eve gave fruit to Adam. Sarai gave Hagar to Abram.

Moses used this pattern to show that just like Adam and Eve, Abram and Sarai failed to trust God. However, as we will see, God's promises will not be stopped because of our lack of trust, but will proceed to fulfilment because God made them.

God foresaw Sarai's plan just as he foresaw the fall. God didn't plan their sin, but he factored their sin into his bigger, more comprehensive plan.

[1 : 5 1] Let me explain a bit further. Adam and Eve in Genesis 3 failed to trust and obey God. Eve took a wrong step. Adam complied or acquiesced.

Bad long-term consequences followed, yet God's plan continued. All humanity was changed by their decision to eat the forbidden fruit. Yet God already planned for Jesus, Adam and Eve's future offspring, to crush the serpent's head, Genesis 3.15.

And the parallel in Genesis 16, Abram and Sarai failed to trust and obey God. Sarai took a wrong step. Abram complied or acquiesced. Bad long-term consequences followed, yet God's plan continued.

Ishmael fathered a nemesis set of Arab tribes that to this day has demonstrated hostility against Israel. Yet God already planned for both Isaac and Ishmael to generate descendants of Abram that would be too numerous to count.

God's promise to Abram would still be fulfilled. However, the aspect of the blessing that was concerned with descendants would now be delivered through two sons and not just one.

[3 : 0 9] Now let's look at the first character in the story, Sarai. It's common to judge Sarai most harshly, but let's take a closer look at the story. Sarai at that time was about 75 years old.

That means she was the same age as Helen Mirren. Sarai had faithfully followed Abram from Ur to Haran to Canaan. When Moses introduces her in Genesis 11:30, he simply writes, Now Sarai was barren.

She had no children. We call that a simplistic description. Abram and Sarai had visited Egypt together to escape a severe local famine.

While they were there, they did a little shopping, accumulated some sheep, cattle, donkeys, camels and slaves. That is, men servants and maid servants.

We can be fairly sure that one of those Egyptian maid servants is none other than Hagar, arguably the star of Genesis 16. Egyptian slaves normally wore a khalasaris, which was a baggy linen dress.

[4 : 21] Here's a photo of Anne Hathaway wearing a similar looking garment, though perhaps a little longer than was needed in the hot Egyptian weather. Slaves were considered to be personal property.

This means Abram and Sarai were regarded as the owners of Hagar. Now Sarai was in an awkward position. She was faithful to her husband Abram, yet she lived with the stress of not being able to produce an heir for him.

God had promised Abram an heir, yet still after several years, Sarai wasn't pregnant. Sarai wasn't pregnant. What's more, they were old. They were waiting and waiting for God to fulfill his promise.

My good friend David always hoped to be married. He'd done his best to find a wife and managed to attract several women, yet nothing ever worked out. He realized it was possible he would not be a husband or a father since he was still single at the age of 46.

Then two years ago, a young Christian woman fell in love with him. Amanda was half his age, but they shared almost all the same interests. A few months ago, they had a baby girl.

[5 : 32] David waited about 23 years to find a wife and another 18 months to become a father. Waiting was difficult, yet once God's plan unfolded, David was very glad he waited.

Now Abram and Sarai would eventually wait 25 years to have a baby together. For Sarai, year after year, she waited for God to fulfill his promise.

Every month brought fresh disappointment. One day, about 10 years into their 25-year wait, and of course not knowing that they still had another 15 years until the birth of Isaac, Sarai had an idea, a creative thought.

She gained a fresh perspective on God's promise and saw a new possibility. Let's read verse 2. Sarai said to Abram, The Lord has kept me from having children.

Go sleep with my maidservant. Perhaps I can build a family through her. She acknowledged God's sovereignty, which is commendable, yet she was now taking matters into her own hands.

[6 : 46] She decided it was up to her to build her family and provide Abram with an heir. Since God had clearly and definitely promised Abram a baby, one possibility was that it wasn't yet the right time.

Sometimes we trust the Lord to do something and he seems to take forever. In my experience, God has a mind of his own and although his plans are good, his timing is unpredictable.

Further, God is not compelled to tell us when he will do what he plans to do. God expects us to trust him for longer than just a moment. He expects us to trust him and continue trusting him even if we have to wait a long time.

Many people testify that God didn't intervene for them until they were at the end of their rope. My experience is that we actually don't know the length of our rope.

sometimes God intervenes years after we thought we'd reached the end. In the meantime, while we're waiting, God expects us to trust him.

[7 : 55] This is the essence of faith, trusting God to be faithful in delivering what he promised in the Bible to give us. Further, it's trusting God to be true to his character and to keep caring for us and working out his purposes even when our life doesn't appear to be going the way that we want.

Yes, Sarai was not yet pregnant but God had promised and God would build their family. She did not need to solve God's problem. God would do what he said he'd do and he'd do it at the right time.

Sarai found it difficult to wait and that is why we read in verse 3 that she took her Egyptian maidservant Hagar and gave her to her husband to be his wife. Of course, Abram was under no obligation to play along yet he seemed to raise no objection.

At that time, Abram was about 85 years old. This means he was the same age as Clint Eastwood. Abram is held up in the Bible as an example of trust and faith in God.

Romans chapter 4, a discussion on justification by faith, quotes Genesis 15, 6, Abram believed the Lord and he credited it to him as righteousness. Why then did Abram, a pillar of faith, cooperate with Sarai's plan?

[9 : 21] Perhaps he thought her plan sounded reasonable. After all, God had not said who the mother would be, just that Abram would be the father. Also, the culture at the time permitted the use of maidservants as surrogates.

Babies born from those unions were considered to be of the mistress, so in this case, Sarai. In other words, it was culturally acceptable for Sarai to produce a baby for Abram through Hagar.

Culturally speaking, Sarai could indeed build their family through her slave. To us, this seems a strange practice. To people of the day, it wasn't strange at all.

There are similar modern-day situations. For example, I recall being shocked when Charles, my friend in Vanuatu, told me he and his wife had given one of their children to his brother on another island.

His brother's wife had been unable to conceive and the custom was that he should give them one of his. Now Charles and Rose only see their son once or twice a year.

[10 : 30] It is difficult for me to forget that Rose's deeply sad, teary eyes as she reflected on the loss of her son. She missed him terribly. To my Australian morals, this was not right.

However, it is customary in Vanuatu. So what should Abram and Sarai have done? Although it was customary to use slaves as surrogates, there was still something wrong with Sarai's plan.

What would you do if God had given you an ironclad promise yet you were struggling to wait patiently for God to fulfill that promise? What would you do? Yes, you might be tempted to come up with a plan.

You might consider giving God a hand to speed things up. We are not told in Genesis 16 that Sarai cried out to God in prayer. She merely directed her husband to sleep with her slave.

We are not told in Genesis 16 that Abram prayed or offered sacrifices to God. He merely followed Sarai's plan and slept with Hagar. For us, as Christians, particularly when we are struggling to wait patiently for God to intervene in our situations, our first step must not be implementation of our own plans.

[11 : 45] Our first step must be to continue trusting God who loves us and to express that in prayer to God asking for His grace and mercy. I suggest our second and third step should be to read the Bible, remind ourselves of God's character and His promises, and to seek help from mature Christians who care about us.

We should seek God's solution because it is the best one. Now, what went wrong with Sarai's plan? Verse 4 tells us that when Hagar knew she was pregnant, she began to despise her mistress.

Perhaps Hagar decided that since she was the one bearing Abram a baby, she should be the number one wife and Sarai should be the number two wife. Perhaps Hagar also resented Sarai for, you know, pushing her towards Abram and using her as a surrogate.

Moses does not explain. However, Sarai was clearly upset by Hagar's attitude. She blamed Abram. Abram's response was weak. He said, do with her whatever you think best.

He gave Sarai permission to mistreat Hagar. She did mistreat her, so Hagar fled. In verse 7, attention shifts to Hagar's tragic situation.

[13 : 10] The angel of the Lord found Hagar, you can read it, verse 7, the angel of the Lord found Hagar near a spring in the desert. It was the spring beside the road to Shur.

Now, Shur was near Egypt. Hagar was naturally trying to get home to her own people. Where else could she go? The angel of the Lord is an interesting term.

On the one hand, it does not say the Lord, but the angel of the Lord, thereby distinguishing the angel or heavenly messenger, that's what angel means, from the Lord.

Even verse 10 simply says the angel. On the other hand, it sounds as though the Lord himself is speaking to Hagar. Of course, this could simply mean the message is dear to the heart of the one who sent the angel.

However, in verse 13, we read, she gave this name to the Lord who spoke to her. Christian tradition suggests the angel of the Lord may have been God the Son, the second person of the Trinity who was incarnated much later as Jesus Christ.

[14 : 17] Nonetheless, what is important is what was said to Hagar. Whether it was God or God's messenger, we know that it was God's message to her. The angel asked Hagar, see verse 8, Hagar, servant of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?

I regularly ask myself similar questions. Hagar answered, I'm running away from my mistress. Look at verse 9. Then the angel of the Lord told her, go back to your mistress and submit to her.

In verse 10, the angel added, I will so increase your descendants that they will be too numerous to count. Does that ring any bells? Here we see the grace of God extending part of Abram's blessing to Hagar.

Just like God promised Abram, she too would have uncountable descendants. salvation would come through a future descendant of Sarai, but Hagar could gain comfort from the fact that she was not forgotten and her baby would not be forgotten.

Now let's read verse 11. The angel of the Lord also said to her, you are now with child, of course she knew that, and you will have a son. That was a revelation.

[15 : 35] The angel revealed to her that she was carrying a baby boy. You shall name him Ishmael, for the Lord has heard of your misery.

God heard of a misery. God gives special attention to the outcast, to the literal poor, and God's people should share that concern. Verse 12.

He will be a wild donkey of a man. His hand will be against everyone, and everyone's hand will be against him. And he will live in hostility toward all his brothers.

Now I should point out that although we describe people as donkeys in order to insult them, the meaning here was simply that the boy would be fiercely independent. Perhaps growing up without a father.

I don't know. It is not an insult, but merely an insight into his character. The hostility aspect is unfortunate, and we've seen this ever since in the rivalry between Israel and other Arab nations.

[16 : 39] This is one of the long-term bad consequences of Sarai's plan. However, we should remember that God knew what was going to happen. God was expecting Ishmael before Hagar was expecting him.

Please take a look now at the next verse, verse 13. She gave this name to the Lord who spoke to her. You are the God who sees me, for she said, I have now seen the one who sees me.

Hagar, an Egyptian slave, gave God a nickname. You are the God who sees me. This reminds me of Jesus seeing another outcast, looking up into a sycamore tree.

Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house. Luke 18. God saw Hagar and God sees us. God heard of Hagar's misery and God has heard of our misery.

Hagar returned to Sarai, as she was told, and to Abram. Abram named his son Ishmael, which means God hears. As we continue to trust God to do all that God has promised in the Bible, let us remember these things.

[17 : 59] Number one, God hears our misery. Two, God sees us. Three, God's plan is always the best.

Four, God is gracious and his plans are not thwarted by our mistakes. Five, God will continue to lead his mission, salvation in the world.

And six, God expects us to trust him while we wait. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, you make big promises and we know that you are completely faithful and trustworthy and that you deliver on your promises.

Thank you for including us in your family. We pray that you'll have mercy and grace upon us as we wait patiently for you to fulfill your promises. We thank you for all that you've given us in Christ and we pray, Lord, that you will continue to work out your purposes in the world at the honor of your name.

Amen. Amen.