



In chapter twelve we saw a very ugly side of Abram when he offered his wife over to the Pharaoh of Egypt but in chapter sixteen we see the ugly side of Sarai. In the incident with Pharaoh, Sarai appeared to be a silent pawn caught up in the sin of her husband but in this chapter she is neither silent nor innocent.

Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. But she had an Egyptian maidservant named Hagar;² so she said to Abram, "The LORD has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my maidservant; perhaps I can build a family through her."

Abram agreed to what Sarai said.³ So after Abram had been living in Canaan ten years, Sarai his wife took her Egyptian maidservant Hagar and gave her to her husband to be his wife.⁴ He slept with Hagar, and she conceived.

When she knew she was pregnant, she began to despise her mistress.⁵ Then Sarai said to Abram, "You are responsible for the wrong I am suffering. I put my servant in your arms, and now that she knows she is pregnant, she despises me. May the LORD judge between you and me."

⁶ "Your servant is in your hands," Abram said. "Do with her whatever you think best." Then Sarai mistreated Hagar; so she fled from her.

⁷ The angel of the LORD found Hagar near a spring in the desert; it was the spring that is beside the road to Shur.⁸ And he said, "Hagar, servant of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going?"

"I'm running away from my mistress Sarai," she answered.

⁹ Then the angel of the LORD told her, "Go back to your mistress and submit to her."¹⁰ The angel added, "I will so increase your descendants that they will be too numerous to count."

¹¹ The angel of the LORD also said to her:

*"You are now with child
and you will have a son.*

*You shall name him Ishmael,^a
for the LORD has heard of your misery.*

*¹² He will be a wild donkey of a man;
his hand will be against everyone
and everyone's hand against him,
and he will live in hostility
toward^b all his brothers."*

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^c the One who sees me."¹⁴ That is why the well was called Beer Lahai Roi^d; it is still there, between Kadesh and Bered.

¹⁵ So Hagar bore Abram a son, and Abram gave the name Ishmael to the son she had borne. ¹⁶ Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore him Ishmael.

This story is shocking to use because we know about the great promises given to Abram and Sarai. We know that they will be given a son of God’s promise so why would they take matters into their own hands? It happened for the same reason you and I do it—we don’t believe God’s promises. Up to this point in time, Abram and Sarai had been waiting ten years for God to fulfill his promise. Abram was 75 years old and Sarai was 65 years old when they left everything and moved to Canaan and were promised children. Now they are 85 and 75 and their biological clocks were not just ticking faster they had ceased to tick altogether. Sarai was already past the age of child bearing and must have felt that God’s promises, if they came true at all, would not happen through her.

We also have to remember that the culture in which they lived prized children as the highest achievement for women. Our culture is just the opposite. Children are either tolerated or else they become an unwanted inconvenience that can be eliminated by swallowing a couple of pills or by the abortionist’s scalpel. But in Sarai’s day, a woman who could not conceive was only half a woman. Sarai was a wealthy woman with many servants and all that she needed in life yet she lacked the thing she desired the most—a son. This is also when you and I get into the most trouble—when we feel are entitled to something but don’t receive it. If I feel that I deserve to have a particular thing—even if that which I desire is a good thing—but if I deserve it, I will do whatever it takes to possess that one thing.

Have you ever felt that way—that you would do whatever it takes to get what you think you need—even if it bends God’s laws in the process? Sarai’s problem began very much the same as Eve’s. It followed the typical pattern of temptation, desire, disobedience and blame.

	Genesis 3:6-8	Genesis 16:1-16
TEMPTATION	the woman saw	Perhaps I can build a family through her.
DESIRE	good, pleasing, desirable	Sarai...had an Egyptian maidservant
DISOBEDIENCE	she took	Sarai...took...Hagar
BLAME	The woman you put here...she gave me	You are responsible for the wrong I am suffering.

The strange part of this story is the fact that Sarai coveted the womb of Hagar. Each of us is guilty of the sin of coveting at times, but I am guessing that no one here has ever coveted someone else’s womb! She really didn’t care about Hagar as a person which is all the more obvious later in the story. Sarai turned Hagar the person into Hagar the object. She objectified Hagar. She depersonalized Hagar. She used Hagar for her own personal gain. You’ll notice that Sarai never refers to her by name. In verse two she refers to Hagar as “my maidservant” and in verse five she is merely “my servant.” Verse three tells us that Sarai “took” Hagar and gave her to Abram. People are not objects to be “taken” and “given” as mere property.

You might be thinking that the problem began with owning servants in the first place. Weren’t Abram and Sarai no better than southern slave owners from our own nation’s dark history? It is true that Hagar was a “maidservant” in the household of Abram, but Hagar was not a slave in the sense that we are used to. Most servants in the OT were more of an indentured servant working to pay off debts. Furthermore, there were all kinds of OT laws which provided for the protection

and care of such servants. They were to be treated in humane ways and there were even provisions to gain their freedom or be adopted into the family. The mere fact that Hagar was in their household was not wrong, but their treatment of her was wrong. They began to treat her as a piece of property. Hagar became an “it” instead of a “who.” She became nothing more than a rented womb so that Sarai could have a son.

Then as soon as the whole ill conceived idea went awry, Sarai immediately shifted into blame mode. *Then Sarai said to Abram, “You are responsible for the wrong I am suffering. I put my servant in your arms, and now that she knows she is pregnant, she despises me. May the LORD judge between you and me.”* This is Adam shifting the blame onto Eve. This is Eve shifting the blame on to Satan. This is your children shifting blame upon one another. This is your husband

BLAME Why own it when you can shift it?

shifting blame on to you or your wife shifting blame on to you. I think a good bumper sticker would read: Blame—Why own it when you can shift it?

But what Sarai did next was far worse than a little passing of the proverbial buck. *“Your servant is in your hands,” Abram said. “Do with her whatever you think best.” Then Sarai mistreated Hagar; so she fled from her.* First, Abram absolved himself of all responsibility by allowing Sarai to do whatever her sinful heart pleased. Then, Sarai began to abuse Hagar mercilessly. The word for “mistreated” is the same word that is used to describe how the Egyptians mistreated the Hebrew slaves. *“But the Egyptians mistreated us and made us suffer, putting us to hard labor”* (Deut. 26:6). I don’t imagine that the mistreatment by Sarai was mere female squabbling. How were the Hebrews “mistreated” by the Egyptians? They were treated like the lowest kind of slaves. They were beaten. They were worked to the point of exhaustion. They were probably malnourished and underfed. Their sons were killed. The abuse was so bad that Hagar fled from Sarai. Here we have another important word—fled. This word is almost always used for someone who is fleeing for their life. Here’s the point: Hagar was probably abused so badly that she thought her life—and the life of her baby—were in danger. I don’t think that Sarai would ever have killed Hagar’s unborn child outright, but her mistreatment was slowly killing them. I could make a strong case here that Sarai was thinking, “If I can’t have my own child with my husband Abram, then why should Hagar have a child with him? It was very close to attempted murder and attempted abortion—at least that was the direction Sarai was moving.

To be sure, Hagar owns some blame here. She “despised her mistress.” She had an air of superiority about her that was extremely offensive to Sarai. Sarai returned her ill treatment with jealousy, anger, bitterness and rage. These two women became mortal enemies fighting an epic battle with their wombs, but the main difference between the two was that Sarai was in the position of power and Hagar was not. It’s interesting that when the Egyptians were in a position of power over the Jews they abused them and when Sarai, a Jew, was in a position of power over Hagar, the Egyptian, she abused her. Sarai “mistreated” the Egyptian slave just as the Egyptians “mistreated” her descendants when they were slaves.

Power has an inherent ability to corrupt those who possess it. This is why the Bible warns so often and so loudly about its inherent dangers. Prophets who do not speak the word of the Lord and who abuse their position of influence will be judged more harshly. Kings who do not lead

with justice and mercy rightly earn more condemnation. Warnings about the abuse of power trickle down into family relationships. It is why Paul offered a warning to fathers in Ephesians chapter six. *Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord.* All parents are in a position of power over their children and that power can be used for good or for evil. Children are well aware of this power struggle and they quickly learn how to break down the castle walls. Parents—what is the most powerful tool in the arsenal of a child? Whining. Am I right? Whining is more of a stealth weapon of attack. Children know that whining may not win the day every time, but they also know it has the effect of a slow and steady hammering on the parental walls of power. Little by little the walls begin to crumble and eventually the kids can storm the castle and attain a victory for their side. Sometimes I think they plan this stuff out. Can't you see your children holding session in their war room strategizing their next attack? The "general" (and every family has a general!) addresses his troops saying, "OK, our intel informs us that mom is beginning to wear down. I feel that if we make a unified attack right before dinner—you know, how she's always tired and run down right then anyway—if we all attack right before dinner, her defenses will surely fall and victory will be ours!"

If whining is like a stealth weapon that is effective over time, a temper tantrum is like a nuclear missile—it just blows up all at once and decimates anything and everyone in the vicinity. If the tantrum itself does not destroy the parental wall of defenses, most of the remaining parents will succumb to the heat and nuclear fallout.

We all know that our kids know that we have the power in the family and we all know that they want the power. This is the definition of parenting, is it not? The only question that remains is this—how you will respond mom and dad? Will you be like Sarai and abuse your God-ordained power? Will you exasperate your kids with your heavy-handedness and dominance over them? Or will you be like Abram was with Sarai and abdicate all responsibility? The entire plan of bearing a child with Hagar was ill-conceived from the start and Abram should have had no part in it. When Sarai complained to him and blamed him, he should have protected Hagar but instead allowed her to be abused by his wife. Parents who let their children win will destroy them just as surely as a domineering parent. These issues of power and control affect all relationships.

But the larger question may be this: how did Sarai and Abram justify such atrocious behavior? What would lead them to mistreat Hagar so badly that she was forced to sell for her life? It is possible that they took a promise of God and twisted it to their own purpose, which is a form of legalism. In Genesis 15 God promised Abram saying, *This man will not be your heir but a son coming from your own body.* God promised that a son would come from Abram's own body, therefore they could argue that as long as the son came from his body it did not matter who supplied the other half. A union between Abram and Hagar would produce a son which came from Abram's body, thereby fulfilling the promise in a technical sense. You could say that they were obeying the letter of the law but not the spirit of the law. If pressed, Abram and Sarai could claim that they were obeying God's promises, but in reality it was massive disobedience and lack of faith. This is a form of legalism. I spoke with a man one time who trampled all over dozens of Biblical commands and principles, but then when he discovered he could use the Bible for his own advantage, he demanded that others obey Scripture. If Scripture was against what he wanted to do he ignored it but if it helped him achieve his goals he lauded it. This kind of thinking is

among the most dangerous in the church because such people claim to be taking the high ground spiritually.

The only thing worse than disobeying God is disobeying God while you are pretending to obey him. At its best it is called rationalization and at its worst it is called deception. What's the difference between rationalization and deception? Rationalization happens when we disobey God in some area but we try to rationalize it or explain it away by saying what we did was really no big deal or by making a case that the wrong we did was actually right. But most times we are caught up in extreme rationalization, we are not really aware that we are doing it. Other people observing us know that we are rationalizing but we may have deceived ourselves so completely as to be ignorant of our own rationalization. On the other hand, when we are aware of our own rationalization it becomes deception. We want everyone else to think that we are obeying the Lord when we know full well that we are not. Admittedly, there is a fine line between rationalization and deception. I think you could make a case that most rationalization begins as deception. When you try to deceive yourself and others long enough, you start to believe it yourself. Such a person may even fool other people for a while and if they are really good at it, they may fool a few people completely, but it's all just a charade. Sarai's master plan was conceived within her own flesh so when it began to crumble it was easy to jump ship.

Sarai's other motivation could have been revenge. After all, Abram gave her over to be the wife of Pharaoh of Egypt. In the same way, Sarai gave Abram over to Hagar of Egypt.ⁱ The similarities in the two stories are eerily similar. We don't have a clear word from Scripture on this point, but it is quite possible that Sarai wanted to exact a little revenge on her husband while getting what she ultimately wanted—her own son. It is also quite possible that Abram went along with the plot out of guilt and shame. When Abram Abandoned Sarai to Pharaoh, he gave up his responsibility to protect and lead his wife. It started in chapter 12 and worsened in chapter 16. In chapter twelve he gave up his moral authority so in chapter sixteen he couldn't speak truth into the crazy situation.

A third possible motivation was that everyone else was doing it. This much is true—it was not uncommon in Semitic cultures for a maidservant to be given to a husband if the wife was unable to conceive. It is likely that Abram and Sarai were familiar with this custom and decided to imitate the people around them. “Everyone else is doing it.” How many times have we *heard* that excuse? How many times have we *used* that excuse ourselves?

Think of all of the possible reasons for this madness—revenge, guilt and shame, “everyone else was doing it.” Then these things turned into anger, bitterness, blame shifting and abuse. The frightening thing about this story is that throughout all of the sin and sorrow, Sarai saw herself as a victim. She was the victim because God had prevented her from conceiving (verse two). She was the victim because Hagar despised her. She was the victim because her husband had brought all of the problems upon her. Do you see—Sarai believed with all of her heart that she was a victim when in reality she was the chief victimizer! I have seen many people over the years—Bible believing Christians—who claimed the title of victim, or who at least talked endlessly like a victim, when they were little more than a result of their own poor choices. Now don't let your mind wander and think, Oh yeah, I've know a few people like that as well.” We can miss the point that we all do this at times. If we get offended or hurt by someone, our first reaction is to

yell, “Ouch that hurt! You hurt me!” All of our focus is on our own pain and we are unable or unwilling to see where we have contributed to the problem. This can happen in small ways or in enormous ways like it did with Sarai and Hagar.

Hagar fled for her life and for the life of her baby and then something wonderful and shocking happened. The angel of the Lord found Hagar in the desert and said to her, “*Hagar, servant of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going?*” Let me be clear here—this angel was not an ordinary messenger—this was the Lord himself. This was an O.T. theophany—an appearance of the Lord in a bodily representation. First we see that he called her by name—Hagar. That must have been a sweet sound to her ears. In this story, no one ever called her by her name. She was less than a person. She was a rented womb, a thing, an *it*. But now the Lord of the Universe visits her and calls her by name. Of course the Lord knew her entire story better than she knew it herself, but he lovingly probed her with questions—*where have you come from, and where are you going?*” This reminds us of the Lord speaking to Adam in the garden—Adam, where are you? Who told you that you were naked?

But the Lord did much more than speak—he promised great things. “I will so increase your descendants that they will be too numerous to count.” Where have we heard these words before? They are nearly identical to what the Lord spoke to Abram in chapter fifteen. “Look up at the heavens and count the stars—if indeed you can count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.” This is an amazing promise given to a slave woman wandering in the desert! I don’t think this was on the same level as the covenant with Abram, but it was a great promise spoken in a time of great need with a great deal of intimacy. Hagar was so moved by this experience she named the Lord—“*You are the God who sees me,*” for she said, “*I have now seen^c the One who sees me.*” This is a statement of intimacy. You are the God who sees me. You are the Lord who knows my name and calls me by name and promises great things.

In addition to all of the moral lessons of victimization and blaming, let me draw some final conclusions from all of this.

First, this reminds us that the promise of a child would come by grace and not by works. Abram and Sarai were willing to twist and manipulate God’s words so that they could have a son in their own timing and in their own way. God promised them something that was beyond human control and human effort, but they lost patience and lost faith in his promise. Sarai tried to “work” at receiving a promise but failed. Then she tried to destroy that which she worked for, and she failed at that too! Sarai couldn’t even mess up what she’d already messed up. It is always easier to work for God’s favor than it is to accept it by grace through faith.

Second, we see another example of how the gospel is intended for every tribe, nation, people and language. In his mercy, the Lord visited this poor Egyptian slave in her time of need. The Lord will give mercy on whomever he desires to grant mercy, even when God’s chosen people are unmerciful. His mercy knows no limits

Third, we are reminded how the Lord visits his people in great intimacy. For those who know the Lord, he is the God who sees. He is the Lord who knows us and calls us by name. He sees our need and knows it from beginning to end.

Finally, we are reminded that the Lord often delivers us through suffering but not always from suffering. Did you notice what the Lord said to Hagar? “*Go back to your mistress and submit to her.*” He didn’t say, “Hagar, my dear, I have an Egyptian chariot waiting for you which will carry you back to Egypt where a handsome prince will meet you, sweep you off your feet, marry you tomorrow and you will live happily ever after.” There was no sappy, Hollywood ending to this story, instead the Lord told her to return and submit to Sarai.

Let me be clear here. This is most certainly not a Biblical principle which tells abused woman to return home to their abuser. That would be a demented and cruel use of this text. If any woman is in a place of abuse, they need to do what Hagar did and flee for their life. But nevertheless, the Lord did tell Hagar to return *and* to submit. The Lord could say this because he also gave her a promise of protection. She would bear a son. He would become a great nation. In other words, even though she might have it rough back with Sarai, she would not die and her son would live and prosper. The Lord may not deliver you from your pain and suffering but he will always deliver you through it.

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^a *Ishmael* means *God hears*.

^b Or *live to the east* / of

^c Or *seen the back of*

^d *Beer Lahai Roi* means *well of the Living One who sees me*.

ⁱ As one commentator put it, “The way in which Sarai takes the initiative to solve a problem instead of waiting for the Lord’s intervention smacks of Abram’s approach in 12:10-20.” Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, p. 7

^c Or *seen the back of*