

## Session 11: Impatience

Genesis 15:1-6; 16:1-6

God expects His people to patiently wait for His timing.

**Psalm 27:14** Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!

**Psalm 130:5** I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope;

**Isaiah 40:31** But they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.

**Romans 8: 23-25** And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. 24 For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? 25 But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

Why do we often struggle to wait patiently for God's timing?

### Understand the Context (Genesis 15:1–16:16)

Documents found at the ancient city of Nuzi in Mesopotamia shed significant light on the customs and practices of the world of the patriarchs. One custom included the legal adoption of a male servant as heir if the master had no biological son. This historical fact provides the groundwork for today's session.

Ten years or so had passed since God first promised Abram that he would have a son. Abram was pushing 85 or 86 years old when the events of Genesis 15 took place. Still, he had no son, no heir. No doubt, Abram grew impatient, as did Sarai his wife.

**Genesis 15:2** suggests that Abram was familiar with the customs described in the Nuzi documents and was thinking about adopting his servant. God, however, had a different plan. He had made His promises to Abram, and He would be faithful to keep them.

After reasserting the promise of a son who would be the first in a line of innumerable descendants, God formally ratified His covenant with Abram. Ancient agreements like this were established with the slaying of animals that would be cut into halves.

After the animals were cut in half, each party would pass between the pieces. This symbolized the seriousness of the agreement with the understanding that "may I too be cut asunder if I break this agreement." It was a solemn and serious vow because covenants were not taken lightly.

The one thing that set this agreement apart from any other was that God alone passed between the animal halves, emphasizing the one-sidedness of this covenant. God took the initiative and would bless Abram immensely. This blessing was not based on anything Abram had done or would do. It was rooted in nothing but the sovereign nature and grace of God. Abram's only part in this covenant agreement was trusting and obeying God.

Trust, however, sometimes proves difficult. While Abram and Sarai had God's promise, Sarai grew impatient and doubtful as time passed. In her impatience, she chose a shortcut that proved disastrous. Fathering a child through Sarai's maidservant, Hagar, seemed reasonable. However, this attempt to run ahead of God turned out to be a wrong choice and created problems for years (even centuries) to come. From this shortcut came a son named Ishmael.

Despite Abram and Sarai's attempt to "help" God, He remained faithful to His word. A line of nations was born to Abram through the descendants of Ishmael. But this was not the line of promise. For that, Abram needed to trust—and wait—a little longer.

### **Believed (Genesis 15:1-6)**

1 After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision: "Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." 2 But Abram said, "O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" 3 And Abram said, "Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir." 4 And behold, the word of the Lord came to him: "This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir." 5 And he brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be." 6 And he believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness.

(v. 1) *The word of the Lord:* This phrase appears here for the first time in Genesis—and again in verse 4. While these are the only two times the wording appears in Genesis, it occurs more than one hundred times throughout the Old Testament, often in conjunction with a vision from God. The phrase most often is associated with a prophetic word from God. This phrase typically introduces revelation to a prophet eg 1 Sam 15:10 Hos 1:1 . In Genesis 20:7 Now then, return the man's wife, for he is a prophet, so that he will pray for you, and you shall live. But if you do not return her, know that you shall surely die, you and all who are yours." Abraham is called a prophet

(v. 1) *Vision:* The Old Testament differentiates between a dream and a vision. God spoke to His people in both ways, but a vision often occurred when a person was awake. Visions were also a frequent way that God spoke to the patriarchs in the book of Genesis. These encounters with God always contained some special revelation from Him that provided direction and commands.

(v. 1) *Shield . . . reward:* The challenge to Abram to reject fear might raise the question of why he was afraid. Perhaps his fear was that God's promise of an heir was not going to happen. To this fear (and any others Abram might have harbored), God's answer was twofold. First, He promised protection, pictured in the image of a shield psalm 84:11 For the Lord God is a sun and shield; the Lord bestows favor and honor. No good thing does he withhold from those who walk uprightly.. Second, God also promised provision as He spoke of a great reward. This reward referred to the promised descendants of Abram. God's first words to Abram are reassurance: Don't be afraid. I am your shield. Your reward will be great. The following verses make it clear that Abram did indeed have questions about how God would keep the enormous promises He had made to Abram. God addresses Abram's emotions: It is safe to set aside your fear. I will serve as your shield, your protection against harm. The reward will be worth the wait.

(v. 2) *Lord God:* The Hebrew—*Adonai Yahweh*—can also be translated "Sovereign Lord." This title is very rare in Genesis among the patriarchs, but it is much more common in the Old Testament's prophetic writings. God is described in the Bible as all-powerful and all-knowing (Psalm 147:5), outside of time (Exodus 3:14; Psalm 90:2), and responsible for the creation of everything (Genesis 1:1; John 1:1). These divine traits set the minimum boundary for God's sovereign control in the universe, which is to say that nothing in the universe occurs without God's permission. God has the power and knowledge to prevent anything He chooses to prevent, so anything that does happen must, at the very least, be "allowed" by God.

(v. 2) *Childless:* In Abram's world, being childless was interpreted as divine punishment. Abram reminded God of the promise given to him and suggested a shortcut or a compromise that might fulfill God's promise. Taking a household servant as an heir was common in that day.

(v. 2) •*Eliezer of Damascus*: This is the only time this servant is mentioned by name. Eliezer could possibly be the servant mentioned in the narrative of Abraham seeking a wife for Isaac in Genesis 24.

(v. 5) *Number the stars*: To dispel the idea of Eliezer being Abram's heir, God restated the promise of numerous offspring. In Genesis 13:16, God stated that Abram's descendants would be as numerous as particles of dust. Here, God pointed to the stars and challenged Abram to number them, a task that can't be done.

(v. 6) *Believed*: For a husband and wife who were childless and advanced in age, God's promises seemed like an impossibility. Yet, Abraham believed the Lord. The phrase carries the idea of putting your full weight on something, trusting it will hold you up. The word also points toward the future because what had been promised would be achieved at a later date.

Abram put his confidence in God's promise, trusting that He would accomplish what He said He would do (see Rom. 4:21). This was not the first time Abram trusted the Lord. His obedience in journeying to Canaan was another step of faith (see v. 7).

(v. 6) *Counted . . . righteousness*: is an accounting term that relates to assigning value or adding to one's account. Righteousness speaks of behavior that holds to a certain standard. Abram's belief met God's standard; therefore, he was in a right standing with God. This righteousness did not come from anything Abram did. It was a unilateral act of God. This verse is quoted three times in the New Testament (Rom. 4:3; Gal. 3:6; Jas. 2:23).

### **Impatient (Genesis 16:1-4)**

1 Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. She had a female Egyptian servant whose name was Hagar. 2 And Sarai said to Abram, "Behold now, the Lord has prevented me from bearing children. Go in to my servant; it may be that I shall obtain children by her." And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai. 3 So, after Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her servant, and gave her to Abram her husband as a wife. 4 And he went in to Hagar, and she conceived. And when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress.

(v. 1) *Egyptian servant*: The Hebrew wording does not refer to a common servant, but to a personal slave. Bible scholars speculate that this servant was acquired while Abram and Sarai were in Egypt (see Gen. 12:10-20), possibly even as a gift from Pharaoh (12:16).

#### *Key Person*

##### •Hagar

The name means "stranger" which may be an apt description of how she felt when Sarai turned against her. The name appears 12 times in Genesis and twice in the New Testament book of Galatians. The two different Genesis narratives concerning Hagar—here and in chapter 21—identify her as both a victim and an antagonist in her conflicts with Sarai. While Sarai's plan to get an heir for Abram turned out to be a tremendous mistake, the descendants of Hagar through Ishmael would agitate the descendants of Sarai through Isaac for centuries to come.

(v. 2) *Has prevented me*: Ten years had passed since God's promise of an heir, and Sarai apparently had lost hope. In fact, she blamed God for her circumstance, stating that He was the reason she had not had children. Barrenness was a devastating embarrassment and stigma. Out of this mindset, Sarai hatched a plan to remedy the situation. Sarai understood that God was sovereign

over the womb. He had promised descendants to Abram and Sarai, and they had not yet come after many years. There was a lot of pain in these words.

- The pain of hope deferred making the heart sick (Proverbs 13:12).
- The pain of prayers not yet answered.
- The pain of arms that had never yet held her own child.
- The pain of public shame.

(v. 2) *Obtain children by her*: Ancient cultures in the Middle East allowed for surrogate arrangements when a wife was unable to produce heirs of her own. To obtain children was an idiomatic expression for starting a family. Surrogate motherhood is illustrated well in the life of Jacob. Because one of his wives, Rachel, was initially barren, she gave Jacob her maidservant to father a child (30:1-9). Later, his other wife, Leah, did the same thing when she could no longer bear children of her own (30:9-11). A godly Christian wife has a lot of wisdom for her husband, and many husbands learn the value of listening to the wisdom of their wives. Yet no wife is infallible, and Abram was responsible for his sin of heeding the unwise, unbelief-based advice of his wife.

A. Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar her maid, the Egyptian, and gave her to her husband Abram to be his wife: They each acted according to unbelief. Abram did not actually marry Hagar, but he acted towards her as a man should only act towards his wife.

b. After Abram dwelt ten years in the land: It had been more than ten years since the promise was made regarding Abram's descendants. By most accounts, ten years seems like a long time to wait for the promise of God.

i. The whole practice of surrogate parentage was somewhat common in the ancient world and may have been acceptable to God on other occasions; but it wasn't for Abram, the friend of God and the man of faith. God had a different path for him.

ii. Abram and Sarai were discouraged enough that they approached the problem of no children by leaving God out of the matter. It was as if they said, "With God out of the equation, how do we solve this?" This was wrong for many reasons.

- God is never out of the equation.
- Men and women of faith must walk in faith – not in unbelief.
- Men and women of faith must see things mindful of the realm of the spirit, not only mindful of the material world.

iii. The long wait for the promise discouraged them and made them vulnerable to acting in the flesh. Yet even after this, it would still be more than 13 years until the child of promise came.

iv. When we impatiently try to fulfill God's promises in our own effort, it accomplishes nothing and may even prolong the time until the promise is fulfilled. Jacob had to live as an exile for 25 years, because he thought he had to arrange the fulfillment of God's promise to get his father's blessing. Moses had to tend sheep for 40 years in the desert after he tried to arrange the fulfillment of God's promise by murdering an Egyptian.

v. It is much better to receive God's help than to try and help Him with our own wisdom and even unbelief.

c. So he went in to Hagar, and she conceived: Abram certainly acted according to his own power and wisdom when he agreed to inseminate Hagar and did not trust in God's ability to provide an heir through Sarai. But this wasn't a matter of a sensual romance. According to some of the customs of the day, Hagar would actually sit on the lap of Sarai as Abram inseminated her, to show that the child would legally belong to Sarai, as Hagar was merely a substitute for Sarai.

i. We understand this from the similar occasion of using a servant as a surrogate mother in the case of Rachel's giving of Bilhah to Jacob when Rachel was barren. In that context, Genesis 30:3 reads: So she said, "Here is my maid Bilhah; go in to her, and she will bear a child on my knees, that I also may have children by her."

ii. The phrase "bear a child on my knees" refers to the ancient practice of surrogate-adoption. Some believe that the phrase refers only to a symbolic placement of the child on the knees of one who adopts it. Others believe that it refers to the surrogate sitting on the lap of the adoptive mother during both insemination and birth. For example, referring to Genesis 30:3, the Twentieth Century Bible Commentary says: "These words are probably intended literally, and not merely as figurative adoption."

iii. We should not regard the idea that Hagar was inseminated and gave birth "on the knees" of Sarai as a certainty – we don't know enough about the ancient practice, and even if it were an ancient custom, it doesn't mean that it was followed in every case. But it certainly is a reasonable possibility.

d. And she conceived: From Sarai's perspective, a terrible thing happened – Abram succeeded in making Hagar pregnant. This proved beyond all doubt the failure to provide a son to Abram was the fault of Sarai, not her husband. In a culture that so highly valued childbearing, mothering the child of a wealthy and influential man like Abram gave a servant girl like Hagar greater status, and made her appear more blessed than Sarai.

i. This is a good reminder that results are not enough to justify what we do before God. It's not right to say, "Well, they got a baby out of it. It must have been God's will." The flesh profits nothing (John 6:63), but it can produce something. Doing things in the flesh may get results, and we may be sorry we got them.

ii. Whatever a man or woman attempts to do without God will be a miserable failure – or an even more miserable success.

e. When she saw that she had conceived, her mistress became despised in her eyes: Hagar immediately began to think of herself as better and greater than Sarai. A bad situation became worse.

It should be noted that, as the story played out, Sarai never directly addressed Hagar as a person. Rather, Sarai saw her as a piece of property to be used for whatever purpose was needed. Also, Sarai never recognized Ishmael as a son.

(v. 3) *Ten years*: According to the teachings of Jewish rabbis, after ten years of barrenness, a husband could lawfully divorce his wife and marry another. This, of course, was not happening here. What we do see, though, is that Sarai lost hope in the promise of God after a decade of waiting. Her shortcut around God's plan and her ability to bring Abram into the scheme might remind some of Eve bypassing God's command and Adam following her example (3:6).

(v. 3) *As a wife*: Clearly, Hagar was treated as an inferior to Sarai. This was not a case of Abram taking a second wife so much as taking a concubine. The relationship was essentially sexual, as Hagar served as a surrogate mother for Abram's offspring. This is the only instance of "wife" being applied to Hagar.

(v. 4) *Looked with contempt on her mistress*: Contempt means to think lightly of someone or to despise them. It can also carry the idea of cursing someone. Obviously, Hagar was filled with pride because she had achieved what Sarai could not. The seeds of discord between the two began to grow.

In fact, the contempt demonstrated between Sarai and Hagar foreshadowed the strife that has grown between their offspring over thousands of years. Genesis 16:12 states that Ishmael's descendants would live in conflict with others—and that included Abram's descendants through Isaac. Believers must safeguard against accepting shortcuts to God's plans.

### **Impetuous (Genesis 16:5-6)**

5 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!" 6 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.

(v. 5) *May the wrong done to me be on you:* Sarai's immediate response to the birth of Hagar's child was the opposite of what one might expect. Earlier, she had blamed God for her situation. Now, she placed the blame on Abram. In essence, she wished all the cruelty and oppression she was experiencing would fall on his head as well.

Sarai had lost sight of the fact that this was her idea from the beginning—not to mention a step away from God's specific promises and direction. This shortcut to achieving God's promise had no chance of succeeding from the start and brought out the worst in everyone involved.

(v. 5) *The Lord judge between you and me:* Sarai demonstrated a self-righteous attitude, as if she had done nothing wrong. In truth, both Sarai and Abram bore the judgment of God due to their lack of faith. Sarai sought to do God's will her way. Abraham allowed Sarai to control the situation instead of taking the lead. Both were at fault, and the faith exhibited in Genesis 15:6 appears to be missing in this whole incident.

(v. 6) *In your power:* This is the second time that Abram had given in to his wife's wishes. Instead of feeling compassion for Hagar and defending the biological mother of his son, Abram left her open to the vindictive abuse of Sarai. Abram, the great man of faith and character, didn't always act in a righteous manner. His journey of faith, with its ups and downs, mirrors the journey we all take today. We are all broken, but, thankfully, we are not beyond repair.

(v. 6) *Sarai dealt harshly with her:* The Hebrew term translated dealt harshly comes from a group of words that speak of oppression, domination, and severe treatment. The phrase indicates bursts of anger and possibly even physical blows. All the anger that Sarai had experienced during these barren years, waiting on God's promise, was suddenly and explosively poured out on Hagar.

This was not the last time Sarai would do this. Later, after Hagar's son, Ishmael, was born, Sarai kicked both of them out of the camp in jealousy and rage (see Gen. 21:9-10).

(v. 6) *She fled:* Most likely, Hagar thought about fleeing back to Egypt. Since the support of a family group was lacking in Abram's camp, the next logical thing would be to return to her own people.

Genesis 16 states that later on her journey, Hagar encountered the angel of the Lord who announced that she would give birth to a son who would father numberless descendants. The angel of the Lord instructed her to return to Sarai and to submit to her authority.

**Key Cross Reference : Sarah and Hagar:** Hundreds of years after Moses told the story of Hagar and Sarai in Genesis 16, Paul used the details of the narrative as an intricate allegory for the Christians in Galatia. *Study Galatians 4:21-31* and reflect on how Paul used these women to illustrate salvation history. Identify what each woman represents and how his metaphor applies to our lives as believers today.