

Abram and Hagar

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“Now Sarai, Abram’s wife, had borne him no children. And she had an Egyptian maidservant whose name was Hagar. So Sarai said to Abram, “See now, the LORD has restrained me from bearing children. Please, go in to my maid; perhaps I shall obtain children by her.” And Abram heeded the voice of Sarai. Then Sarai, Abram’s wife, took Hagar her maid, the Egyptian, and gave her to her husband Abram to be his wife, after Abram had dwelt ten years in the land of Canaan. So he went in to Hagar, and she conceived. And when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress became despised in her eyes. Then Sarai said to Abram, “My wrong be upon you! I gave my maid into your embrace; and when she saw that she had conceived, I became despised in her eyes. The LORD judge between you and me.” So Abram said to Sarai, “Indeed your maid is in your hand; do to her as you please.” And when Sarai dealt harshly with her, she fled from her presence.”

-Genesis 16:1-6

This is a very difficult passage of Scripture to read through. Not because it is complicated to understand, but because Abram and Sarai are both depicted as such examples of faithfulness to God that it is painful to see them fail in such terrible and inexcusable ways. But that is exactly why passages like this are so important for us to study. It would be nice if we as Christians were always faithful to the word and instruction of our Lord, but the truth of the matter is that even the most faithful among us will experience times of terrible failure that will burden us with long term consequences. Because of this, passages like this can serve as cautionary tales that teach us behaviors that we should avoid through the mistakes of those who have lived before us. But they can also serve as tales of hope when we see God’s faithfulness and provision for His people even when they fall short.

The Wisdom of the Age

And behold, the word of the LORD came to him, saying, “This one shall not be your heir, but one who will come from your own body shall be your heir.”

-Genesis 15:4

Before we delve into the mistakes that Abram and Sarai made, it is important to contextualize their errors. For us in the modern west, it would be easy for us to casually condemn their behavior because of how obviously wrong it is to our modern

sensibilities. We live in a culture that condemns slavery and polygamy, making it easy for us to see the clear error of Abram taking Hagar as a concubine when he was already married to Sarai and Sarai abusing Hagar when she was upset with her. However, we need to remember the cultural context. In Abram's day, not only were many forms of polygamy and slavery accepted, they were often expected for people of Abram and Sarai's status and position.

Abram saw himself as a type of patriarchal lord or monarch, which is essentially how God described Abram's role. When God promised Abram the land of Canaan, and also that Abram's descendants would inherit the land, he was practically making Abram a type of ruler who would have a dynastic bloodline. But, in that culture, the line of succession was always passed down through the male patriarch and not the female. Therefore, it was considered pretty normal if a ruler could not have children with their wife, they would take on a concubine or a mistress in order to perpetuate the bloodline. This concubine could be treated harshly by the man and the woman because the slave was still considered property in that time.

The Wisdom of God

Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

-1 Corinthians 1:25

However, throughout the Bible, God is constantly challenging the wisdom of the age. This is why God goes out of His way to choose the younger child to inherit the blessing, when the wisdom of the age was that the eldest son carried the blessing. We see this when God chooses Jacob over Esau, Joseph over Ruben, Ephraim over Manasseh, and David over Eliab. God could have easily chosen the older sibling in order to conform to the cultural expectation, but He intentionally goes against it to make a point:

"For My thoughts are not your thoughts, Nor are your ways My ways," says the LORD. "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways, And My thoughts than your thoughts."

-Isaiah 55:8-9

This doesn't mean that God denies all human custom, in fact in the previous chapter God used a cultural ceremony that Abram was familiar with in order to establish His covenant with him. But it does mean that God's wisdom will sometimes conflict with the wisdom of the time, and when a conflict occurs between the wisdom of God and the wisdom of man, we are to reject the wisdom of man and trust in the wisdom of God.

This is a much harder thing to do than we tend to think. When we look at the past, it is easy to see their errors, and therefore, to see ourselves as superior to those that came before us. But this would be a fearful mistake of arrogance.

“There is a way that seems right to a man, But its end is the way of death.”

-Proverbs 14:12

This form of arrogance is the easiest one to fall into. We grow up in a given culture and we develop convictions based on the wisdom of our age. We rarely even consider why we think particular behaviors are right and other behaviors are wrong, instead our practical morality is usually shaped by the company that we keep and the society that we develop in. A simple thought experiment might help show this point. When we think about a behavior like cannibalism we are filled with feelings of revulsion and disgust, but have you ever tried to ground those feelings? Meaning, could you actually give a well thought out explanation for why cannibalism is absolutely wrong? Especially when you consider a more complex scenario like using the bodies of those who died of natural causes to feed the less fortunate.

The fact is, the reason why we experience disgust when we do this morbid thought experiment is because we are thankful recipients of centuries of received wisdom. Our ancestors received the commandments from God that forbade this behavior, they then worked out the ethical reasonings by applying the concepts of the dignity owed to someone who bears the image of God, and the implications of the resurrection, all to bring us the cultural taboo against cannibalism. However, the danger of our modern culture is the belief that morality is just a matter of common sense. When we think in these arrogant ways, we begin to judge our ancestors harshly, and to tear at the structure of our own morality, thinking that “sensible” people can surely move beyond the superstitions of our past and create a more just and equitable society around modern, secular morals.

I would like to point out that the most egregious tragedies of the last hundred years have been caused by this fallacious world view. Everything from the communist revolutions to the Fascistic conquests of World War 2 have all been created by people who thought they were clever enough to rewrite the moral order in their own image and ignore the wisdom of the past and the revealed morality of the Scriptures. The issue of man is always that we think ourselves far more clever than we really are. The solution to this blind arrogance is learning the humility to examine our behavior, as well as the behavior of our world and scrutinize it against the text of Scripture. And the best place to do this is within the confines of a loving community that can challenge us and make us think in different directions.

“As iron sharpens iron, So a man sharpens the countenance of his friend.”

-Proverbs 27:17

God’s Morality

“...for when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things in the law, these, although not having the law, are a law to themselves, who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves their thoughts accusing or else excusing them)...”

-Romans 2:14-16

This leads to another interesting point, if Abram and Sarai were unaware of the wrong in their behavior, was it actually wrong? The apostle Paul answers this point in the passage above. Although there are many who never receive the commands of God through His Scripture, it doesn’t change God’s moral order. So, even though culturally Abram and Sarai may have been in the right, they are still in violation of God’s natural law that indeed judged their behavior harshly.

We must remember that this part of Scripture is in the form of narrative literature. Narrative literature is unlike the clear didactic teachings that we find in books like Deuteronomy or Romans where morality is spelled out in prose and understood directly. Instead, narrative literature is concerned not with telling, but with showing. The author of Genesis doesn’t need to add a sentence explaining that polygamy or mistreatment of servants was wrong, the narrative shows us that lesson more clearly and powerfully than a moral teaching ever could.

Instead of simply telling us that sexual intimacy is reserved for one man and one woman in the confines of marriage, it instead shows us what happens when that natural law is violated. We can see clearly the jealousy that is created between Sarai and Hagar, and the tension that fills the home. We can also see how that jealousy can turn violent in Hagar mocking Sarai’s barrenness and Sarai abusing Hagar in response. This story is not given so that we can emulate the behavior of the main characters, but instead so that we can clearly understand what is wrong in their behavior so that we might avoid it. In fact, when the apostle Paul talks about the Old Testament stories to the church at Corinth he says:

“Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come.”

-1 Corinthians 10:11

What this also shows us very clearly is the power of the natural law. The morality of God is what governs the universe that we live in, which means that even if someone is ignorant of God's morality, it won't stop the natural consequences of violating His law from falling on them. No matter what we might believe personally, there is a moral reality that we are all beholden to, and violating that reality will have severe consequences for us. The narrative of the Old Testament is there to teach us about this moral reality that we might always strive to live within God's moral universe.

Abram's Failure

All that being said, let's take a look at the specific moral failures of Abram and Sarai that we might learn from their mistakes. The first and biggest mistake that Abram made was in failing to understand his true calling. Since God's specific call on his life had to do with him and his descendants inheriting the land of Canaan, Abram assumed that God's primary call on his life regarded the land and not his marriage. For this reason you see Abram devalue his marriage at various times throughout his life.

The first time we see him clearly do this is in Genesis 12 when Abram and Sarai are driven out of the land of Canaan by a famine and they are forced to stay in Egypt. During this time, Abram fears for his life because of Sarai's great beauty. He assumed that since Sarai was so beautiful, some powerful Egyptian would murder him in order to obtain Sarai. In order to avoid this, Abram convinces Sarai to pretend like they weren't married, but that he was merely her brother, so that he would obtain favor, even though it would cost Sarai her virtue.

This is our first hint that Abram did not see the promise of God to be for him and his wife, but only for him. Remember, that the promise regarded a specific lineage that would inherit the land after him, by giving Sarai to other men, he risked her becoming pregnant by another man. The fact that this reality didn't even seem to bother Abram, or cause him to ask God about the matter, shows very clearly his heart. He did not consider the promise of God to apply to Sarai, only to himself, and it is God who had to supernaturally intervene to protect Sarai's virtue.

God's intervention should have taught Abram that His plan and promise included Sarai, but unfortunately it didn't. Because of this, even if he never explicitly said it, he had created an attitude in his home that the marriage was not the priority, but only his vision to build an inheritance.

Echoes of the Fall

“Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned—”

-Romans 5:12

What we see happening here is a universal problem that transcends culture and time. This is a participation in the original fall of Adam and Eve. When God first created Adam with the purpose of reflecting God's image, He initially created Adam as a singular being and had him tend the garden.

“Then the LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to tend and keep it. And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, “Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; “but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.” And the LORD God said, “It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper comparable to him.”

-Genesis 2:15-18

The reason why God declares that Adam's creation was in a sense “not good” is because he was not equipped to fulfill his purpose alone. He needed a “helper comparable to him” in order to reflect the full multifaceted nature of God. This means that Adam's primary role shifted to be about tending his marriage over the garden itself. This is why the fall happens through a subversion of the intended roles of the garden. Instead of Adam tending to his wife and leading her correctly, Eve is alone when Satan tempts her and then tempts her husband to eat of the fruit in return.

A form of this occurs in the life of Abram. He should have seen his role as tending to his wife and leading her properly, but instead he focuses so much on his role of tending to his “garden”, building his inheritance, that he neglected his wife and left her vulnerable to temptation. Once she is tempted to act outside God's order, she in turn tempts her husband and he gives in to her distorted desires.

“So Sarai said to Abram, “See now, the LORD has restrained me from bearing children. Please, go in to my maid; perhaps I shall obtain children by her.” And Abram heeded the voice of Sarai. Then Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar her maid, the Egyptian, and gave her to her husband Abram to be his wife, after Abram had dwelt ten years in the land of Canaan. So he went in to Hagar, and she conceived.”

-Genesis 16:2-4

As sons of Adam it is easy for us to repeat the mistakes of our forefather. I know for me, it is so easy for me to become fixated on the work I do as a pastor. But even though I

am trying to commit my work for God's glory, I can unintentionally de-prioritize my family and send a subtle message to my wife that my work is more important than her. There is a complex balance here, since we were created and called to work, but if we are not careful we can put our work before our marriages.

I can make the same mistake of Abram and suggest to my wife that her role is to uphold my calling, as opposed to my calling being our marriage and the fruit of that relationship is my work.

Ordinate Affection

"Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish. So husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord does the church."

-Ephesians 5:25-29

The call of marriage is to uniquely glorify God in His eternal unity with the church. This is the greatest representation of God's love on this earth, and therefore it supersedes all other callings in my life. This does not trivialize my work or my other relationships, but it does set up a necessary hierarchy that has to be respected. The ancient Christian theologian Augustine of Hippo once made this point in his book "The City of God".

"And thus beauty, which is indeed God's handiwork, but only a temporal, carnal, and lower kind of good, is not fitly loved in preference to God, the eternal, spiritual, and unchangeable good. When the miser prefers his gold to justice, it is through no fault of the gold, but of the man; and so with every created thing. For though it be good, it may be loved with an evil as well as with a good love: it is loved rightly when it is loved ordinally; evilly, when inordinately, It is this which some one has briefly said in these verses in praise of the Creator:" These are Thine, they are good, because Thou art good who didst create them. There is in them nothing of ours, unless the sin we commit when we forget the order of things, and instead of Thee love that which Thou hast made." But if the Creator is truly loved, that is, if He Himself is loved and not another thing in His stead, He cannot be evilly loved; for love itself is to be ordinally loved, because we do well to love that which, when we love it, makes us live well and virtuously. So that it seems to me that it is a brief but true definition of virtue to say, it is the order of love; and on this account, in the Canticles, the bride of Christ, the city of God, sings, "Order love within me."

-St. Augustine - "The City of God"

Augustine is arguing that the source of true virtue is to rightly order our affections. This would insinuate that the source of vice is having affections that are improperly ordered away from the love of God and the proper order of His creation. The main intent of this quote is for Augustine to dissuade people from loving anything more than God, but He also points out that two different created things can be equally disordered. To quote again:

"When the miser prefers his gold to justice, it is through no fault of the gold, but of the man; and so with every created thing. For though it be good, it may be loved with an evil as well as with a good love: it is loved rightly when it is loved ordinally; evilly, when inordinately, It is this which some one has briefly said in these verses in praise of the Creator:"

-St. Augustine - "The City of God"

In this example, it isn't someone loving gold more than God, but more than justice. It isn't wrong for someone to have affection for gold, nor is it wrong for him to have affection for justice, but if one loves gold more than justice, he has disordered affections that lead him away from virtue and into vice. It is right for a man to love his work, and it is also right for a man to love his wife, but if he loves his work more than his wife, his affections are disordered and he is creating the occasion for sin and calamity. Not only is this attitude an affront to God who has given us the correct hierarchy for our affections, but it is also a sin against our wives who God has blessed us to be with.

"Husbands, likewise, dwell with them with understanding, giving honor to the wife, as to the weaker vessel, and as being heirs together of the grace of life, that your prayers may not be hindered."

-1 Peter 3:7

Peter tells us that a failure to appropriately "honor" our wives actually has an effect on our prayers. This doesn't mean that God's favor will turn against us when we fail as husbands, but it does mean that such a sin will actually affect our relationship with God.

"And this is the second thing you do: You cover the altar of the LORD with tears, With weeping and crying; So He does not regard the offering anymore, Nor receive it with goodwill from your hands. Yet you say, "For what reason?" Because the LORD has been witness Between you and the wife of your youth, With whom you have dealt treacherously; Yet she is your companion And your wife by covenant. But did He not make them one, Having a remnant of the Spirit? And why one? He seeks godly

offspring. Therefore take heed to your spirit, And let none deal treacherously with the wife of his youth. "For the LORD God of Israel says That He hates divorce, For it covers one's garment with violence," Says the LORD of hosts. "Therefore take heed to your spirit, That you do not deal treacherously."

-Malachi 2:13-16

This passage is a powerful reminder to us as husbands. These men thought they were honoring God by going to serve Him at His altar, but He tells them that He doesn't even want them to offer Him sacrifices anymore because of how they are mistreating their wives. It literally says that their actions have caused God to cover His own altar in tears. As a pastor, I might think I am honoring God by spending all my time serving in the church or serving His people, but if I am neglecting my wife in the name of "ministry", I am offering God a service that He has rejected. Once again, this doesn't mean that I neglect my work, but that I must achieve a balance in my life that assures my wife that she is my top priority. This is also why polygamy is obviously a sin. A man's wife must be his top priority after his relationship with God, but it is impossible to have two top priorities. Polygamy was always doomed to fail and lead to broken homes because no one can give their whole heart to more than one person.

Sarai's Failure

"Wives, likewise, be submissive to your own husbands, that even if some do not obey the word, they, without a word, may be won by the conduct of their wives, when they observe your chaste conduct accompanied by fear. Do not let your adornment be merely outward—arranging the hair, wearing gold, or putting on fine apparel— rather let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the incorruptible beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in the sight of God. For in this manner, in former times, the holy women who trusted in God also adorned themselves, being submissive to their own husbands, as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord, whose daughters you are if you do good and are not afraid with any terror."

-1 Peter 3:1-6

Just because the main failure in this situation is Abram's does not mean that Sarai is free from blame. Like Abram's failure, Sarai's sin is more subtle and is woven through the text in a very complex way. We can see that Abram did play a role in denigrating Sarai's view of herself before God, but she also participated in this broken image through her insecurity and then projected her insecurity outwards to tempt her husband into falling. It is harder for me to condemn Sarai, because her sin was a reaction to her husband's sin, but nevertheless, we are called to live correctly even if those around us are behaving sinfully.

Godly Submission

The virtue that Sarai failed to exhibit here is submission. This is a little ironic since Sarah is specifically commended in the above passage for being the ideal of submission with marriage. But this demonstrates a valuable point, just because we can be great in an area, doesn't mean we won't at times fail to practice what we know we should. Abram is given as the ideal of faith, yet in this story we see his faith fail. Sarai is likewise given as the ideal of submission, yet in this passage she fails to do this as well.

The mistake that most modern people make when it comes to the virtue of submission is to believe that submission is an inferior role, and therefore it is performed in an absolute way, where the wife is not allowed to question her husband. For this reason, many modern people have rejected the virtue of submission altogether and see passages like this as a holdover from our patriarchal past. What they fail to notice is that 1 Peter 3 begins by saying "Wives, likewise..." The term "likewise" is in reference to the previous chapter in which Peter tells us the ultimate example of faithfulness and submission:

"For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps: "Who committed no sin, Nor was deceit found in His mouth"; who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously..."

-1 Peter 2:21-23

If submission is a negative thing only performed by one who is "lesser" within a relationship, how is it that Christ's submission to the authorities placed over Him is our ultimate example? To put it another way, if we thought that the wife's submission to her husband proves that the husband is in all ways superior to his wife and therefore should not be questioned, we would also have to conclude that Christ's submission to earthly authorities also means that He was inferior to them and therefore could not question them.

This is obviously not the case, being God, Jesus is clearly superior to them and He did question the authorities throughout His earthly ministry. However, according to Peter, this questioning was done within the virtue of submission and never compromised His superior role as the Son of God. To put it simply, submission is not the same thing as timidity. Submission is a recognition of authority that is demonstrated in offering respect and humility. Timidity on the other hand is obedience created by fear of the power of another and a feeling of inferiority about oneself. When Jesus was on the earth, He acknowledged and respected the authority of the religious leaders, but never cowered before them.

“Then Jesus spoke to the multitudes and to His disciples, saying: “The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat. “Therefore whatever they tell you to observe, that observe and do, but do not do according to their works; for they say, and do not do.”

-Matthew 23:1-3

God has created the world with hierarchies that we are called to respect. Jesus instructs His followers to respect the position and the authority of the religious leaders. But He then explicitly tells them that this respect only goes so far by saying: *“Therefore whatever they tell you to observe, that observe and do, but do not do according to their works; for they say, and do not do.”*

He is telling His people that their words are correct because they are consistent with Scripture, but their example is flawed because they don’t practice what they preach. It was this hypocrisy that Jesus then calls out:

“For they bind heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on men’s shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers.”

-Matthew 24:4

Jesus goes on from there to clearly denounce the many sins of the religious elites of His day. By doing this, Jesus was not stepping out of the virtue of submission, but He was instead perfectly balancing His submissive role by showing respect to the authorities of His day, but within that respect calling them out for their hypocrisy.

When Abram told Sarai to do things that violated her conscience, like in Egypt when he offered her up to be a part of Pharaoh’s harem, she should have confronted Abram’s hypocrisy within her virtue of submission. Instead, she went along with Abram’s will, and as a result, allowed for that reality to sink into her own self image and form deep wounds of self-hatred and insecurity. Within that negative self image, she began to believe that she was preventing Abram from fulfilling his calling. This self-hatred became so great that she actually encouraged Abram to have sex with another woman in order to create an heir with her.

While it is right for us to give Sarai grace given her culture and Abram’s greater failure to lead her properly, this behavior still does violate God’s natural law and therefore had natural, predictable, consequences for their marriage. This one decision creates a wedge between Abram and Sarai that lasts throughout their marriage; they, tragically, never fully recover from this one mistake.

The Heart and the Head

“She opens her mouth with wisdom, And on her tongue is the law of kindness. She watches over the ways of her household, And does not eat the bread of idleness. Her children rise up and call her blessed; Her husband also, and he praises her: “Many daughters have done well, But you excel them all.”

-Proverbs 31:26-29

As stated before, this story is a repetition of Adam and Eve in the garden or Eden. A clear subversion of the given roles of husband and wife that ends up distorting and damaging their relationship. Abram failed in his role to lead Sarai correctly, but Sarai also failed in her role to watch “over the ways of her household...” This is something that we as modern people don't really understand because we have dismissed gender roles for so long, but there is an actual gift that God has given women that is irreplaceable within a household.

In order to understand what this gift is, I will instead express the subverted version of this role that was expressed in the movie “My Big Fat Greek Wedding”. In this movie a character makes this comment about the roles of the husband and wife in marriage:

“The man may be the head of the household. But the woman is the neck, and she can turn the head whichever way she pleases.”

From this view, the man is the head of the marriage in image only, the wife has the real power in directing, and manipulating the man in what he does. While this quote is funny, and admittedly, very descriptive of many marriages, it is unfortunately a description of the inverted roles of marriage that we inherited from the fall and not the ideal that we ought to be aiming for.

The way that I have typically formulated this distinction is by saying that the husband is the head of the relationship, and women are the heart. For ancient man, the head was the center of will and intellect, but the heart was the center of purpose and passion. One is not superior to the other, but they work in tandem with one another to help us function properly. Since the heart is responsible for purpose and passion, it helps us process the important things in life at an intuitive level.

This means that the heart, in many ways, “knows” more than the head, yet its knowledge is not comprehended in ways that we fully understand or articulate. When making a tough decision, many of us have had a “gut feeling” about a particular choice which moves us more powerfully than our intellectual reasoning. It isn't that our “gut” is magic or anything, instead it is an intuitive understanding that corresponds to what we

deem most important and valuable to us. However, if the heart is not correctly ordered, as we talked about before, then these “gut feelings” will almost always be wrong. This means that the “head” works to train the heart in what we *ought* to find most important, and then the heart can function correctly within that framework.

This is how a good, functional marriage should work. The man’s role is to properly order the household towards what is most valuable. That means that the husband is supposed to be the spiritual leader of the home, leading his household towards God and then correctly ordering the priorities of the home in service to God. The wife then takes in these priorities, and by intuitively understanding these priorities, in tough decisions in the house, the wife is the one who will have the “gut feeling” which will help lead the couple to make a decision.

Good Negotiation

If a couple wants to have a proper balance, they have to learn how to negotiate in a way that fulfills 1 Peter 3:1-7. The wife must be able to bring her concerns to her husband in a way that *respects* his role, and the husband must be able to communicate with his wife in a way where he can *understand* her. Many couples never learn how to do this, and instead function a little like Abram and Sarai here. The husband makes some decisions unilaterally without the wife’s say-so, and in other decisions, the wife learns how to wear on the husband’s emotions in order to get her way. This isn’t negotiation, but instead mutual disrespect.

In this story, Abram has incorrectly ordered his home towards his calling above all else. Sarai responds to these priorities with feelings of insecurity and “pushes” Abram towards this terrible decision. This couple has also not learned how to negotiate these decisions in a relevant way, and so Sarai coerces Abram towards her way of thinking, and Abram folds like a house of cards. Now both parties feel that they have the right to blame the other. Sarai declares *“My wrong be upon you! I gave my maid into your embrace; and when she saw that she had conceived, I became despised in her eyes. The LORD judge between you and me.”* (Genesis 16:5).

She feels that because Abram had the final say, this decision is his fault. And (although we aren’t told explicitly what Abram feels about this) it would be rational to believe that he would feel vindicated because he was coerced into this decision by his wife. The truth is that they both share blame for this turn of events. Abram did not properly lead his wife and set a good foundation for what should have been top priority for them. And Sarai failed to respect her husband and submit to him properly. Instead, she took in his negative perspective, allowed her insecurities to eat her up, then coerced her husband into having an affair, and then took out her frustrations by abusing Hagar.

God's Faithfulness

Now the Angel of the LORD found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, by the spring on the way to Shur. And He said, "Hagar, Sarai's maid, where have you come from, and where are you going?" She said, "I am fleeing from the presence of my mistress Sarai." The Angel of the LORD said to her, "Return to your mistress, and submit yourself under her hand." Then the Angel of the LORD said to her, "I will multiply your descendants exceedingly, so that they shall not be counted for multitude." And the Angel of the LORD said to her: "Behold, you are with child, And you shall bear a son. You shall call his name Ishmael, Because the LORD has heard your affliction. He shall be a wild man; His hand shall be against every man, And every man's hand against him. And he shall dwell in the presence of all his brethren." Then she called the name of the LORD who spoke to her, You-Are-the-God-Who-Sees; for she said, "Have I also here seen Him who sees me?" Therefore the well was called Beer Lahai Roi; observe, it is between Kadesh and Bered. So Hagar bore Abram a son; and Abram named his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram."

-Genesis 16:7-16

Before we get into God's faithfulness, I do want to point out that Hagar isn't faultless in this situation either. When she was blessed with a child, she judged Sarai and saw herself as superior to Sarai. However, responsibility gets more and more diluted as bad decisions roll down hill. Abram is clearly most to blame because he was the head of the house, Sarai bears the next biggest blame as his wife and as Hagar's master, and therefore, Hagar bears very little blame since she had no actual choice in this series of events and she was a pagan from Egypt. Abram and Sarai were supposed to be her examples for what the true God is like, instead they behaved even more shamefully than many pagan lords and ladies would have.

But, amidst all this sin and tragedy, God remains faithful and good. More than faithful, God actually takes the sin and wickedness of Abram and Sarai and turns it towards good. We will see this more in the next chapter, but God makes a covenant with Ishmael and makes him the prince of his own nation. Many have seen this as a terrible circumstance because Muhammed later declared that the Arabic people descended directly from Ishmael.

Now it is true that Ishmael's bloodline would certainly be in this area of the world, but it is a mistake to think that, first, all middle easterners have him as an ancestor, since he would at most have a bloodline in Arabia. But even the modern Arab can't claim him as an ancestor in the same way that a modern Jew could claim Jacob as an ancestor,

since the Arab's didn't find this lineage important and therefore didn't protect and catalog his heritage in the way that the Jews did for their own.

All this talk is missing the point of this particular passage. We never see the writer of Genesis lament this point, this is something that we have anachronistically read back into the text. The point of this text is specifically God's faithfulness even in the midst of our sin and failure. God took a situation that should have been merely tragic, and turned it into an opportunity to bring about a different and greater blessing. To put it another way, God doesn't merely forgive the sin of Abram and Sarai, or wrestle something good out of their failure, He actually gives them a blessing that could have only come *from* their failure.

The Ministry of Christ

"The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon Me, Because the LORD has anointed Me To preach good tidings to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, To proclaim liberty to the captives, And the opening of the prison to those who are bound; To proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD, And the day of vengeance of our God; To comfort all who mourn, To console those who mourn in Zion, To give them beauty for ashes, The oil of joy for mourning, The garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; That they may be called trees of righteousness, The planting of the LORD, that He may be glorified."

-Isaiah 61:1-3

This is why it is also beautiful that it is the Angel of the LORD who meets Hagar. This is a much deeper topic than I have room to go into here, but the figure of the Angel of the LORD in the Old Testament is most often a pre-incarnation of the Son of God. We can see this fact in this passage as the Angel of the Lord promises that *He* will bless Hagar, and then after seeing the Angel of the LORD, Hagar declares that she saw God. But we also see this same figure show up at various other times in the Old Testament. One of the most clear instances of this is in Exodus 3 when Moses encounters God in the burning bush. While this is clearly shown to be an encounter with God Himself, in verse 2 it says:

"And the Angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire from the midst of a bush. So he looked, and behold, the bush was burning with fire, but the bush was not consumed."

-Exodus 3:2

Notice that this figure is distinct from God in being named the "Angel of the LORD" and yet, He simultaneously identifies Himself to be God within this same passage. After the incarnation, this becomes blatantly clear for us that this is none other than Jesus prior to

His incarnation. And the beautiful thing is that His mission in the Old Testament seems to be the same as in the New Testament. Jesus quotes directly from the above passage at the start of His earthly ministry, showing that this passage was a prophecy about Him. And at the end of this passage it says that part of Christ's ministry will be to "give them beauty for ashes." This means that Jesus does not just give us something good in consolation for something bad, but will in some way give us something good *for* something bad.

This truth is made most clear through His ministry to us on the cross. Although the cross was the most horrific instance in all of human history, (as the only truly good man in history was violently executed), it was also *through* the cross that we were saved. It isn't that God does something good in response to the evil of the cross, God actually produces the ultimate good *from* the cross. And it is this same ministry that we see the Angel of the LORD perform here.

God does not merely give Abram, Sarai, and Hagar a consolation after all this suffering, a new and distinctive life was created *through* their failure and God actively blesses this new life and creates a people group from him. This is the supreme majesty of our Lord. He is the only One that can truly give us beauty *for* ashes, if we are willing to receive it from Him. It reminds me of what Alexandr Solzhenitsyn says about his unjust imprisonment. Alexandr, like so many others living under the oppressive regime of Joseph Stalin in the Soviet Union, found himself serving an unjust stint in the brutal labor camps. But after he was released, notice what he says about his time there:

"It was granted to me to carry away from my prison years on my bent back, which nearly broke beneath its load, this essential experience: how a human being becomes evil and how good. In the intoxication of youthful successes I had felt myself to be infallible, and I was therefore cruel. In the surfeit of power I was a murderer and an oppressor. In my most evil moments I was convinced that I was doing good, and I was well supplied with systematic arguments. It was only when I lay there on rotting prison straw that I sensed within myself the first stirrings of good. Gradually it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either—but right through every human heart—and through all human hearts. . . . That is why I turn back to the years of my imprisonment and say, sometimes to the astonishment of those about me: "Bless you, prison!"... I nourished my soul there, and I say without hesitation: "Bless you, prison, for having been in my life!"

-Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn - "The Gulag Archipelago"

This is not merely saying that God *used* his time in prison to help others, but that God actively produced something good and beautiful *from* the evil that was done to him. Though this truth is not an excuse to behave rashly, God will discipline the failure of His people, it is a wonderful hope for those of us who fail. When a truly awful tragedy occurs in our life, whether it was self-inflicted or not, the most crushing thought is that the tragedy was meaningless. But think about the incredible hope that is produced for us when we realize that our God can even take our failures and turn them into something that glorifies Him and betters us.

It is this truth that allows for the followers of God to say with absolute confidence “not as I will, but as You will.” We know that the will of God is good no matter what and therefore we humbly receive from our Father’s hand both prosperity and adversity, knowing that He can and does use all things for His own glory and our good. This isn’t an easy truth to accept, but to those who can, it is an insurmountable bulwark against any and all trials of this life. It is a supreme confidence that produces an unshakable faith and confidence. Not that we won’t suffer and doubt, but that even in our suffering, even in our doubts and failures, we stand firm on the promises and faithfulness of our great and mighty God.

We are hard-pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed— always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. For we who live are always delivered to death for Jesus’ sake, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh...

Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal.

-2 Corinthians 4:8-18