

The Test of the Covenant

The second test of Abraham's faith (Gen 16:1-16)

(Abraham Part 5)

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Background:

In the previous chapter, Abraham listened to God and exercised faith, but here he listened to his wife and revealed his unbelief. He ceased to walk in the Spirit and began to walk in the flesh.

Mt 26:41 ... "the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak."

Now, ten years had passed since God promised Abraham that a son would be his heir, coming from his body. God had made the covenant (Gen 15), and God would fulfill it.

Faith is living without scheming, but at this point both of them try to help God accomplish His plan.

This explains why God had to wait until they were old before He gave them the child. They had to be dead in themselves before He could work (Heb 11:11-12).

Abraham's faith was being tested as God delays in fulfilling His promise. In moments like this, we are vulnerable to suggestions of alternative plans, that are of human efforts to assist God in fulfilling His promises.

All Abraham and Sarah had to do was wait by faith

Heb 6:12 so that you will not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.

Abraham agrees with Sarah to have a child through Hagar (16:1-3)

Gen 16:1 Now Sarai, Abram's wife had borne him no children, and she had an Egyptian maid whose name was Hagar. 2 So Sarai said to Abram, "Now behold, the LORD has prevented me from bearing children. Please go in to my maid; perhaps I will obtain children through her." And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai. 3 After Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Abram's wife Sarai took Hagar the Egyptian, her maid, and gave her to her husband Abram as his wife.

The problem, Sarah is still unable to bear a son.

It was shameful to be childless (1Sam 1:6).

Ps 127:3 Behold, children are a gift of the LORD, The fruit of the womb is a reward.

She had an Egyptian maid:

This expression makes clear, that Sarah had complete authority and control over Hagar.

Sarah had special rights over Hagar; she owned, possessed, had Hagar at her command.

Abraham's relation to Hagar was given by the authority of Sarah.

The plan, Sarah convinces Abraham to marry Hagar, to have a son through her.

Sarah suggested that Abraham take her maid, Hagar, as a secondary wife. This was by custom a moral action and may have seemed to Abraham the way God would keep His promise.

"the LORD has prevented me from bearing children"

literally "the Lord has kept me from giving birth;" could be translated; "The Lord will not let me have children" or "The Lord keeps me from giving birth."

It is significant that the Lord, who had promised Abraham a son, is the one who is withholding the coming of this son. Sarah blames God for her barren condition and hints (like Eve in Gen 3:1-6) that He is not good to them.

“Please go in to my maid”

Sarah turns to the world [to Hagar, the Egyptian] for help.
Sarah’s proposal is a human attempt to solve the problem of her barrenness.
Rachel will use the same logic (Gen 30).

“perhaps I will obtain children through her.”

Obtain, “to build;” literally “perhaps I may be built up from her.” could be translated; “Maybe she will enable me to have a son,” “Maybe I will have a son through her,” or “Maybe she will have a son and he will be mine.”

“Abraham listened to the voice of Sarah”

This means that Abraham listened to what Sarah had proposed and accepted it. We may also say, for example, “Abram said ‘Yes’ to what Sarah proposed to do.”

The results of their agreement (Gen 16:4-16)

After Hagar conceives, she begins to look down upon Sarah (Gen 16:4)

Gen 16:4 He went in to Hagar, and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress was despised in her sight.

The verb “was despised” means “to be small, insignificant, unimportant, of little account.”

Hagar’s attitude toward Sarah - she considering Sarah to be of little worth, of no importance.
She looked down on Sarah, as if Sarah were now inferior to her.

Hagar viewed her conception as evidence of divine blessing, and by extension a curse against Sarah. Hagar thought she had gained greater status in Abraham’s household.

Mistress translates a Hebrew word that indicates a woman of high social position.

It clearly marks Sarah, whose name means “princess,” as a person of rank. However, in relation to a servant she is a lady or owner, the status of a mistress is expressed as “the housewife” or “the number one woman.”

Hagar’s mistreatment by Sarah (Gen 16:5-6)

Gen 16:5 And Sarai said to Abram, “May the wrong done me be upon you. I gave my maid into your arms, but when she saw that she had conceived, I was despised in her sight. May the LORD judge between you and me.” 6 But Abram said to Sarai, “Behold, your maid is in your power; do to her what is good in your sight.” So Sarai treated her harshly, and she fled from her presence.

“May the wrong done to me be on you! “

The word **“wrong”** describes deceit and general disregard for law and human life (Dt 19:16; Ps 11:5; Isa 60:18; Ezk 7:23).

Here, the wrong refers to injustice; to the superior attitude Hagar has taken in regard to Sarah.
Sarah is saying something equivalent to “I have been treated unjustly, and it is your fault”

As head of the household Abraham has the power and authority to set relationships right between these two women. But so far he apparently has failed to do so. Sarah is now appealing to

Abraham’s legal responsibility to act.

“I have been wronged and it is your fault,”

“I have been treated unfairly by Hagar, and you are responsible for it.”

“May the LORD judge between you and me.”

Sarah appeals to the Lord to judge who is at fault, (Gen 31:53; Ex 5:21; 1Sam 24:12, 15)
Sarah who gave Hagar to her husband, or Abraham who has not corrected Hagar’s misconduct in relation to Sarah.

Abram says, **“Behold, your maid is in your power; do to her what is good in your sight.”**

In your power is literally “in your hand.”

By giving Sarah the authority to do as she pleases with Hagar, Abraham allows the mistress-slave-woman relation to be established again.

In some languages the idea of a person being in the power or control of another is expressed as “You make her do as you wish,” “You can make her obey whatever you say to her,” or “You can make her your slave again.”

Do to her as you please - literally “do to her what is good in your eyes.”

In this way Abraham gives Sarah the right to take any action she wishes, and thus places Hagar again in her former status.

So, Sarah treats her harshly

Treated her harshly means to “afflict,” “mistreat,” “act badly toward.” (Gen 15:13; 31:50; Ex 22:22-23; Jdg 16:19). Most probably Sarah made Hagar work without rest and abused her verbally.

Hagar’s meeting with the Lord (Gen 16:7-14)

After suffering harsh treatment from the frustrated Sarah, Hagar flees into the desert. Hagar’s name means “to flee”.

The Lord advises her (Gen 16:7-9)

Gen 16:7-9 Now the angel of the LORD found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, by the spring on the way to Shur. 8 He said, “Hagar, Sarai’s maid, where have you come from and where are you going?” And she said, “I am fleeing from the presence of my mistress Sarai.” 9 Then the angel of the LORD said to her, “Return to your mistress, and submit yourself to her authority.”

He called Hagar “Sarah’s maid”, (16:8) and not Abraham’s wife.

The angel gives two commands to Hagar

“You have got to go back ..., and still be her working girl as well as you can.”

The first command is Return to your mistress,
“Go back to your mistress.”

“Go back to the presence of your mistress,”
“Go back to where your mistress is,”
“Return to the woman who owns you.”

The second command submit to her
“submit yourself under her hands,”
“be her slave,”
“submit to ill-treatment at her hands.”
“obey her in everything.”
“do everything she orders you to do.”

The angel gives to Hagar the motivation to obey (Gen 16:10-11)

Gen 16:10-11 Moreover, the angel of the LORD said to her, “I will greatly multiply your descendants so that they will be too many to count.” 11 The angel of the LORD said to her further, “Behold, you are with child, And you will bear a son; And you shall call his name Ishmael, Because the LORD has given heed to your affliction.

1. She will bear a son; And you shall call his name Ishmael ("God hears").
2. She will have innumerable descendants through her son.
Descendants translates the Hebrew "seed."
 "I will increase your descendants until no one will be able to count them"
 "I will cause you to have so many offspring that they cannot be counted."
3. The Lord has given heed ("to hear,") to your affliction ("your suffering," "your trouble," "your pain,") "The Lord has heard how much you have suffered."

The Lord gives her assurance (Gen 16:12-14)

Gen 16:12-14 "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 to the east of all his brothers." 13 Then she called the name of the LORD who spoke to her, "You are a God who sees"; for she said, "Have I even remained alive here after seeing Him?" 14 Therefore the well was called Beer-lahai-roi; behold, it is between Kadesh and Bered.

The kind of person the child will be and what will become of him.

He shall be a wild ass (untameable) of a man; living in the open desert.

"He will live with no one able to control him,"

"Nobody will be able to tell him what to do,"

"He will be ruled by no one."

His hand against every man; (suggests conflict, violence, opposition)

"he will be against everyone."

"he will battle with everyone."

"he will be an enemy to everybody"

"he will not be friends with anybody."

And he shall dwell over against all his kinsmen:

"He will live at odds ...,"

"in defiance of," "in hostility," "defying all his kinsmen."

"... and he will not stay peacefully with his relatives."

When Isaac, Sarah's son, entered the family, there was no room for Ishmael and he was cast out (Gen 21:9). Eventually, Ishmael fathered twelve sons (Gen 25:13-15), and their descendants have been enemies of the Jews ever since.

Hagar gives God, who spoke to her, the title (name) El Roi.

"The strong one who sees" - to describe God as the seeing One. God is the "all seeing One" - from whose eye nothing is hidden, all is seen (Gen 31:42; Ps 33:18; 139:1-3)

What an encouragement this title of God is to us!

God sees our situation (Ps 33:13-19).

God sees the future that He has in store for us (Jer 31:17; Pr 23:17-18; Ps 84:11-12)

Jer 29:11 'For I know the plans that I have for you,' declares the LORD, 'plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope.

Because He sees, we can resist fear in times of trial and turmoil (Ps 27:1-3; 46:1-3).

Because He sees, we are assured of His protection and provision (Rom 8:31-32, 37-39).

The well was called Beer-Lahai-Roi - "well of the living one who sees me" (Gen 24:62; 25:11).

Hagar gives birth to Ishmael (Gen 16:15-16)

Gen 16:15-16 So Hagar bore Abram a son; and Abram called the name of his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. 16 Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to him.

Notice that Sarah isn't mentioned; it was her hope to obtain children through Hagar (Gen 16:2).
Abraham names his son Ishmael.
Abraham is eighty-six years old when Hagar gives birth to Ishmael.

Gal 4:21-31 teaches that Sarah pictures the New Covenant and Hagar the Old Covenant.
Hagar was a slave, and the Old Covenant enslaved people (Ac 15:10)
Sarah was a free woman and Christ makes us free (Gal 5:1)
Ishmael was born of the flesh and could not be controlled; the Law appeals to the flesh but cannot change it or control it.

1Cor 15:56 The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law (Rom 5:20; 7:9).

Isaac was born of the Spirit, a child of promise who enjoyed liberty (Gal 4:23).

Practical lessons:

In great distress (Sarah's barrenness) we must turn to the Lord because He hears the afflicted, sees them in their need, and will miraculously fulfill His promises.

Whenever we run ahead of God, there is trouble.
The flesh loves to help God.

We cannot mix:
faith and flesh; law and grace; promise and self-effort.

God promises - faith believes - hope anticipates - patience waits.
The heart prefers anything to the attitude of waiting.

References used in this study:

The Outline Bible
Faith Life Study Bible
The Summarized Bible
Wiersbe's Expository Outlines on the Old Testament
A handbook on Genesis
The Bible Knowledge Commentary