

PM Genesis 16:1-16

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[0 : 00] Holy Bible from the book of Genesis, chapter 16. Genesis chapter 16.

And just by way of introduction, the book of Genesis, the first book in the Bible, starts with the account of creation, of God creating this good world, and then of the rebellion against God by the first humans, Adam and Eve, and how that rebellion had just an impact on themselves, on their relationships, and then on their succeeding generations, and how Cain murdered his brother Abel. And then from there the world just descends into this sort of increasing spiral of violence and corruption. Until God destroys it at the flood. And then from Noah's family, the world branches out again into many different nations and peoples and languages, and the languages are divided at Babel.

And then from all those different nations and peoples, God chooses one man, Abraham. And God, well, I'll read Genesis 12, 1 to 3, because it's so important.

Indeed, in the whole of the biblical storyline. So there we read that the Lord said to Abraham, Abraham, go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.

[1 : 42] And I will make of you a great nation. And I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonours you, I will curse.

And in you, all the families of the earth shall be blessed. And Abraham obeys God and goes to the place that God will show him. And we read that after Abraham arrives in the land, the land of Canaan, we read that the Lord appeared to Abraham and said, to your offspring, I will give this land. It's in Genesis 12, verse 7. Similarly, a bit later in chapter 13, verse 16, God says to Abraham, I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted.

And then, a bit later too, in chapter 15, Abraham says to God, you have given me no children. And the word of the Lord came to him. And God says, a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir.

God took Abraham outside and said, look up at the sky and count the stars, if indeed you can count them. Then God said to him, so shall your offspring be.

[3 : 04] But then, ten years elapse, and we come to chapter 16 of Genesis. Now Sarai, Abraham's wife, had borne him no children.

She had a female Egyptian slave, whose name was Hagar. And Sarai said to Abraham, behold now, the Lord has prevented me from bearing children.

Go into my slave. It may be that I shall obtain children by her. And Abraham listened to the voice of Sarai. So after Abraham had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abraham's wife, took Hagar, the Egyptian, her slave, and gave her to Abraham, her husband, as a wife.

And he went in to Hagar, and she conceived. And when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress. And Sarai said to Abraham, 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.

[4 : 20] But Abraham said to Sarai, behold, your slave is in your power. Do to her as you please. And Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she fled from her.

The angel of the Lord found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur. And he said, Hagar, slave of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going?

That's true of every culture that's ever been and it's true of our own culture. Of course it's different in each culture but in every culture, including our own, there are aspects of the gospel that just go against the grain.

[11 : 16] And so we might be in a situation where we see very little fruit and no growth. Perhaps we see decline even in the church and that should concern us and of course there's a danger that we just become complacent about that and that's also a danger.

But another temptation is that we might be tempted to ditch aspects of the gospel that our culture finds unpalatable and add stuff that we think will go down really well in our culture to give God a helping hand.

Now of course there is a balance that's needed. We should not put unnecessary obstacles in the way of people considering the gospel of Christ. But repentance is required as we were seeing this morning.

and though God accepts us as we are he doesn't leave us where we are. And the gospel is a call to repentance to turn from our sins to turn to God.

Paul describes the gospel as foolishness and as a stumbling block. So we work but the gospel goes against the grain of our culture as it is with every culture.

[12 : 28] But we look to God and trust in him for the harvest. We don't try to manufacture that harvest for ourselves. Well Sarai has a slave, Hagar.

Now the ESV translates it maid servant. But Hagar is not a servant. She's a slave. She's very definitely a slave.

We see that in verse 6 where Abraham says she's in your power. Do to her what seems good to you.

Do to her as you please. So she's just completely at Sarai's disposal to do as Sarai wants. And Sarai begins to mistreat her.

And even her body, even her reproductive organs are at the disposal of Sarai and Abraham. Hagar is not consulted about this arrangement.

[13 : 28] She has no say in the matter. Sarai decides what to do with Hagar's body, with her reproductive faculties, and Abraham simply agrees. I wonder what you think of that.

Maybe you find it shocking. In a way I hope you do find it shocking. It is shocking. Abraham and Sarai are heroes of Genesis, of the Old Testament, of the whole Bible.

They're some of the main characters in the whole storyline of the Bible. Israel. They were the ancestors of the Israelites, who are God's people in Old Testament times.

So what are we to make of this? Well, I think there's a few things we can say in response. The first is that Abraham and Sarai are deeply flawed heroes.

We already know that from chapter 12, where Abraham lies about Sarai. She says, she's my sister, instead of being his wife, in order to save his own skin. And about Abraham and Sarai, and indeed about all its heroes, the Holy Bible is painfully honest about them.

[14 : 38] And we see, one of the things that we see again and again, is that God uses deeply flawed people. The second thing to say is that God accommodates human weakness and hardness of heart.

slavery was almost universal in the ancient world. And indeed, through most of history, that's been the case. Now, does that mean that we should just accept it as a feature of other cultures?

No. Does the Bible condemn slavery? No, it doesn't. But one important principle for understanding the Bible is God's accommodation of human weakness, frailty, and sinfulness.

Now, it's not that God accepts sin or says that sin doesn't matter. We see God's abhorrence of sin and evil ultimately at the cross of Christ, where in our place Christ bears the punishment for human sin.

sin. But what God's accommodation means is that God meets us where we are. It's kind of like harm reduction. You've probably heard of harm reduction programs.

[15 : 49] Often it's to do with people who have addiction problems. And they're put into one set of substances which are less harmful than the substances they're on. So it's not ideal, but it's just it reduces the harm.

And that's kind of like what God does with the Israelites, with Abraham, and with so much we read of in the scriptures. So God meets us where we are, not where we ought to be.

He meets us in the reality of our situation rather than in the ideal. And in fact, we see two instances of this in this passage.

Slavery and polygamy, having more than one wife. neither of those are what God created humans for. Yet they were so widespread, so deeply ingrained in that society and culture that it was just considered so normal in that time.

And God does not wait till all our problems, our faults, our failings are sorted out before he graciously engages with us. God meets people where they are, as they are.

[17 : 04] He is patient and he accommodates human weakness. But he doesn't leave people there. He begins the process of changing us as individuals and as communities.

But with some things, the process of change takes many years, even many generations. Some of the things in the law of Moses, the law that was given through Moses, may seem shocking to us. And they're not ideal laws, but they're dealing with Israel as it was at that time within that culture. It's really a harm reduction program.

I mean, you get an example of that where the Pharisees ask Jesus about divorce. And he says, Moses allowed divorce or gave you divorce because of the hardness of your hearts.

So the divorce laws in the Torah, in the law, were harm reduction. It was just to try to deal with this situation that was not ideal, but trying to mitigate the worst effects of it.

[18 : 15] So that's one thing we find here, and that's that slavery and polygamy are included in that accommodation of human weakness. sinfulness. The third thing to say is that in the light of the full narrative of scripture, we know that slavery is wrong.

It is not God's design for humans. In the creation account in Genesis chapter 1, it talks about who we are as human beings, male and female.

That we are created in God's image and likeness. And that we are created to rule over the rest of creation. So humans, both male and female, are created with great dignity.

We are not God, but we are like God in certain respects. We are made in the likeness of God. And part of that is that we are given rule and sovereignty over the rest of creation.

And so slavery, where your body and soul are owned by another person, is the absolute negation of that, of what we were created for. When we come to the New Testament, we find that slaves are addressed in some of the letters.

[19 : 25] Because slavery was just as much a part of the Roman Empire in the first century as it was in Abraham's time. And the early Christians had no power to overthrow the institution of slavery.

They were a tiny, powerless minority. And yet, New Testament teaching just totally undermined the institution of slavery.

Read, for example, Philemon. Just a very short letter of Paul to a man called Philemon about receiving back his runaway slave, Onesimus. And Paul writes in verses 15 and 16 of that letter, he says, perhaps the reason that Onesimus was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever, no longer as a slave, but better than a slave as a dear brother.

And so we see the gospel just really obliterating those distinctions that were so ingrained in the ancient world of master and slave. Fifth thing is just looking at church history and that could take a long time, but just a couple of examples.

Gregory was the bishop of Nyssa in modern-day Turkey in the late 4th century. He was one of the three Cappadocian fathers who were great theologians of the Trinity.

[20 : 56] But this is what Tom Holland writes about Gregory in his book Dominion. He said, Gregory of Nyssa was moved by the existence of slavery, not just to condemn the extremes of wealth and poverty, but to define the institution of slavery itself as an offense against God.

human nature, so he preached, had been constituted by its creator as something free. As such, it was literally priceless. Not all the universe would constitute an adequate payment for the soul of a mortal.

And then jumping forward much later in history in 18th and 19th century Britain, there was the campaign for the abolition of slavery, led by people like William Wilberforce and Olaudah Equiano. And what distinguished them was that they were Christians who took the Bible seriously and that led them, that moved them to campaign for the abolition of slavery.

Now many secular people today in our society think that slavery being wrong is just obvious, something all right-thinking people will automatically recognize.

[22 : 06] But that is not the case. Most societies through history have believed that slavery is just the natural order of things. Slavery is just obvious.

And it's the influence of biblical teaching about the nature of humans as made in God's image that motivated people like Gregory and Wilberforce to swim against the tides of their societies and protest against slavery.

And thankfully that influence still remains to a great extent in our society today. Well moving back to Genesis 16.

In verse 2 we read that Abraham listened to the voice of Sarai. So after Abraham had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abraham's wife, took Hagar, the Egyptian, her slave, and gave her to Abraham as a wife.

And he went into Hagar and she conceived. And when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress. And Sarai said to Abraham, may the wrong done to me be on you.

[23 : 22] I gave my servant to your embrace. And when she saw that she was conceived, she looked to me with contempt. May the Lord judge between you and me.

Like Adam before who blamed his wife, now Sarai blames her husband. In verse 6, Abraham said to Sarai, behold, your slave is in your power.

Do to her as you please. Then Sarai dealt harshly with her and she fled from her. Sarai's appeal to God's justice in verse 5 kind of rings hollow.

She shows no justice towards Hagar, her slave. I wonder what would happen if the Lord judged between Hagar and Sarai. And Abraham is no better.

He just washes his hands of Hagar. He says, your slave is in your hands. Do with her as you please. Even though Hagar is now his wife who is bearing his child.

[24 : 34] Abraham's priority just seems to be to get Sarai off his back and have a quiet life. Rather than doing the right thing and taking responsibility for the situation that his actions have got them into.

And for Hagar, the only option seems to be to run away. Despite her extreme vulnerability as a lone pregnant woman.

So that's the first scene. This dysfunctional family. The second scene is in the wilderness. And here in this passage we see God's immense concern and compassion for this runaway slave.

This is not the main story. It's kind of like a sideshow. The main story is Abraham and then his son Isaac and through him Jacob.

And of course from that line the Messiah comes. So it's not the main story. But that doesn't really matter because God, we see in this that God cares for the small people.

[25 : 42] God cares for the people who are insignificant. In the eyes of others. And Hagar was doubly so in that society as a woman and as a slave. So Hagar runs away from Sarai.

But the Lord meets her. The angel of the Lord is usually in the form of a man. And Hagar must have been surprised to be addressed by name by an apparent stranger.

Hagar. And she's met by the angel of the Lord. And this is the first occurrence of many appearances of the angel of the Lord in the Old Testament.

Now it can be a wee bit confusing because there are many angels spoken of in the Bible. Angels are heavenly beings. They're created by God.

And there's multitudes of them. And they occasionally appear to humans. But this is different from that. Different from those created angels. This is the singular angel of the Lord.

[26 : 48] Or it could be translated the messenger of the Lord. And one of the really interesting things about this character who appears at different junctures in the narrative of the Old Testament is that the angel of the Lord is sometimes identified as the Lord himself.

And this is the first appearance of this character, the angel of the Lord. In verse 8, the angel says, Hagar, slave of Sarai, where have you come from?

And where are you going? Just like with Adam, God asks to Adam, where are you? Not to gain information because the Lord knows, but to call to account.

Hagar replies, honestly, I'm running away from my mistress, Sarai. And in verse 9, the angel of the Lord said to her, return to your mistress and submit to her.

That was probably not what Hagar wanted to hear. That would have been a daunting and a very unattractive prospect. But it's followed by a promise. In verse 10, the angel says, I will surely multiply your offspring so that they cannot be numbered for multitude.

[28 : 09] And here we see that this angel of the Lord is not just an ordinary angel, if we can use that term. It is the Lord himself. Only the Lord has the power to give offspring to people.

And then in verses 11 to 12, we have a promise, a prophecy about the future of her son. Behold, you are pregnant and shall bear a son. You shall call his name Ishmael, because the Lord has listened to your affliction.

He shall be a wild donkey of a man. His hand against everyone and everyone's hand against him. And he shall dwell over against all his kinsmen.

Now, it may not seem that positive to be called a wild donkey of a man. I'm sure, you know, if you've had children and you're told that, you know, your child's going to be a wild donkey, it's probably not really what you want to hear about your offspring.

But a wild donkey, the wild donkeys that are spoken of here are actually, they're kind of more like horses. And they live in the desert and roam freely. And I think the kind of the point of this is that Ishmael will have the freedom that his mother longed for.

[29 : 25] She was a slave. She was not free. But her son Ishmael, he will be free. He will be able to roam freely. And although his hand will be against everyone's hand against him and his hand against others, he has agency as that.

It's not, he's not in someone else's hands. He is free to decide that. So the focus is on the freedom and independence that her son Ishmael will have that Hagar herself did not enjoy.

The one feature of Hagar's encounter and experience of God here is these three namings. There are three namings, Ishmael, the Lord, and the well.

So first of all, Ishmael, in verse 11, we read that you shall call his name Ishmael because the Lord has listened or heard of your affliction.

And the name Ishmael means God hears. And the reason given is because the Lord has heard or listened to your affliction or your misery.

[30 : 35] And it's a wonderful thing about God here. Hagar is a minor character in the plot line of the Bible. She is a nobody in that society.

Someone who didn't matter. Who was a possession of her slave master and mistress. Even whose body was at their disposal. A thing to be used at will.

And the Lord is God. The most powerful being in the universe. The one who created all things and who rules the universe and who rules over world history.

And yet this God, the Lord, hears Hagar's affliction. He hears Hagar's misery. And he finds her in the wilderness and appears to her and speaks to her.

And every time Hagar called her son's name, she would be reminded of the fact that God hears. And the second naming is the Lord.

[31 : 36] In verse 13, Hagar called the name of the Lord who spoke to her, you are a God of seeing. For she said, truly here I have seen him who looks after me.

In verses 9 to 12, it was the angel of the Lord who spoke to Hagar. But in verse 13, we're told that it's the Lord himself who was the one who spoke to Hagar.

Hagar's perception, and it's agreed with by the writer of Genesis, is that God himself, it is God himself who has seen her and whom she has now seen. Later on, we have similar examples in Genesis 22.

The angel of the Lord appears to Abraham and then to Moses at the burning bush and later to Gideon. And on these occasions, the angel of the Lord speaks about the Lord in the third person, but also in the first person, speaking of I.

So, the angel of the Lord is both sent by the Lord and is the Lord. He is in some sense distinct from the Lord and is the Lord.

[32 : 54] And so we see here a God who appears in visible form and meets with people. Both, who is both pleasant in one locality and governing the universe.

And it foreshadows the time when God himself would come and dwell among us in and as Jesus Christ. Hagar focuses on seeing.

You are the God who sees me. I have now seen the one who looks after me. And the act of naming is, in Genesis, often implies mastery.

We see that in the creation account. That cannot be the case here. But this is the first time that someone gives a name to God. Perhaps we can call Hagar the first theologian.

And her theology is expressed in a prayer. She addresses the Lord and expresses her wonder that God sees her. And notices her affliction and her misery.

[33 : 55] And cares for her and looks after her. A runaway slave. Well the third naming is the well. In verse 14. Therefore the well was called Ba'ir L'chai Roi.

And the God of the Bible is not someone who is thought up by a committee of philosophers. But he's a God who reveals himself in particular times, particular places, to particular people.

And that's often commemorated in the Old Testament in names. And here it's Ba'ir L'chai Roi. It means the well of the living one who sees me.

For she said, I have now seen the one who looks after me. And this foreshadows the compassion of the Lord Jesus. Who appeared not just for a brief moment.

But was born into this world and lived a fully human life. And spent so much of his time healing and helping and relieving the needs of the downtrodden.

[35 : 02] And the oppressed and the poor and the broken. And ultimately to give his life life on a cross for the salvation of a vast number of people. Well thirdly and finally and briefly, we're back to the family again.

Maybe a slightly more functional family than before. In verse 15 we read that Hagar bore Abraham a son. And Abraham called the name of his son whom Hagar bore, Ishmael.

Abraham was 86 years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abraham. So Hagar obeys the Lord. What the Lord has said, go back to Sarai and Hagar, in spite of the difficulty of that, obeys and goes back.

And yet there's no mention of Sarai here at the end of the chapter. The person that Hagar most feared. Perhaps Abraham has finally woken up to his responsibilities and gave a degree of protection to Hagar.

And we notice that Abraham names the child Ishmael. How did Abraham know that was the name to be given to this child? Well the most likely source is Hagar.

[36 : 21] And perhaps Abraham reasons that if the Lord is looking after Hagar, then maybe I ought to do that too. Well just to round this up.

In verse 8 we saw the question that the angel of the Lord asked Hagar. Where have you come from? And where are you going? What has been your past? What direction are you going in?

Has your life seen trouble? And affliction and misery and oppression? Are you running from something? Is there a burden that is too great for you to bear? A situation too hard to endure?

We see from this narrative that God sees and God hears. And God is willing to meet with you and to help you and to save you. He is the God of compassion who cares about you.

And whoever you are, whatever your status is in the eyes of others, you matter to this God. And this God has come into this world in and as the person of Jesus Christ who says, Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.

[37 : 35] Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

And our response, like Hagar's, is to believe and to obey and to follow. May God bless his word to us.

Let's pray together. Lord, we thank you for your word this evening. We thank you for how in these stories, these narratives, we read of how people encountered you, the living God.

and we read of your character, your nature being revealed to us. And we thank you for the beauty of that revelation. We thank you for your compassion, your care for the for the smallest and the weakest.

And we thank you that we can rely on that care, that compassion, that love. And we pray that in this week, whatever our situation, wherever we have come from, wherever we are going, that we would look to you, that we would trust you, that we would entrust our lives into your hands and that you would bless us and have mercy on us.

[38 : 57] We ask in Jesus' name. Amen.