

Prayers

Opening prayer

Lord Jesus, open our eyes to see the world of the poor, the neglected, the war-torn and the abused. Help us to appreciate the world not from our own point of view, but from the view of others, especially such people; and may we have the courage to do what Jesus did, which was to give up all things in order to love those who God loves. We are Your agents here on earth, and may we not shirk its call. AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas *(Alternatives that can broaden the experience of prayer)*

Praise God in the Spirit; let your whole being praise God, and worship Him with your whole heart. It is perhaps not right to pre-determine how anyone should do this, but that does not mean it should not be done, on purpose and with intent!

On-going prayers

- **Pray for those involved in investment and the creation of wealth.** *Pray that the system of wealth creation upon which we depend will serve godly purposes; for if it does not, then it deserves to be discarded and replaced*
- *Pray for schoolteachers and youth workers who are trying hard to help young people who have no guidance at home. Pray that the Church of God will become involved in education*
- *Praise God for His power to deliver from evil. Stand firm against the devil and all his works in whatever way seems most suitable for you.*

Meditation

If you face events that seem mysterious,
Do not fear; hand them over to the Lord
And let Him guide the way you handle them.

If you face problems that are your fault,
Repent; hand them all to the Lord your God
And let Him bless you with His forgiveness.

If you face a callous attack of the enemy,
Stand firm, to resist this affront to the Lord
And let Him do what you cannot, and defeat him.

If you face the nagging pains of doubt,
Believe; hand these dire feelings to the Lord
And let Him feed your soul; receive His peace.

If you face questions that never fade,
Stop dwelling on these problems; think on Him
And let the Lord your Saviour reign in you again.

Bible Study

Bible passage – Genesis 16: 1-6

¹ Abram's wife Sarai bore him no children, but she had an Egyptian servant-girl whose name was Hagar. ² Sarai said to Abram,

‘Look, you can see that the LORD has kept me from having children; so go in to my slave-girl, that I may have children through her.’

Abram accepted what Sarai said.

³ So, after he had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Abram’s wife Sarai took her servant-girl, Hagar the Egyptian, and gave her to her husband Abram as a concubine. ⁴ He went in to Hagar and she became pregnant. But when she became aware of her pregnancy, she looked with contempt on her mistress; ⁵ so Sarai said to Abram,

‘You are to blame for this outrage against me! Yes it was I who gave my servant-girl to your arms, but now she is pregnant she looks down on me. May the LORD judge between you and me!’

⁶ So Abram said to Sarai,

‘Your servant-girl is under your authority; do to her whatever you wish.’

Then Sarai ill-treated her, and she ran away from her.

Review

It is extraordinary that after the amazing faith described in Genesis 15, the very next part of the story of Abram describes the great man as showing a complete lack of faith about the very thing he had trusted God for (see 15:1-6). As a chapter, Genesis 16 consists of a single story about the birth of Abram’s son Ishmael to Sarai’s slave-girl Hagar, and it begins with our passage today in which the desperate Sarai gives her slave girl Hagar to Abram so that she might have a son by her husband, by proxy. God is mentioned, but makes no appearance in this part of the story; His response to the whole incident and the actions of Abram and Sarai come in the second half of chapter 16 (7-16). It is very important to read a story like this alongside the other stories of Abram, because each one only gives a snapshot, and we can only gain a complete picture of Abram by knowing the whole picture as painted by scripture. He was a human being like us, for whom God was powerfully close (for example in the vision of 15:1ff), but after that God seemed far away as the years passed and the lack of fulfilment of God’s promise created a big family crisis (16:1-6).

In the wider scheme of things, Abram had entered the Promised Land (12:1ff) and immediately made a mistake by going to Egypt and compromising Sarai by allowing her to be taken into Pharaoh’s harem (12:10-16). After that, it appears that he learned a great deal, and a sequence of three stories each confirmed different parts of the promise God had made to Abram. The military victory over Chedorlaomer and its consequences (ch14) confirmed the promise of Abram’s greatness (12:2,3); the vision (ch15:1-6) confirmed God’s promise of descendants (12:2,3) and highlighted Abram’s faith, and the vision of the Covenant (15:7-21) confirmed the promise of land (12:7,13:16). In the midst of all this there was one obvious and glaring problem with the whole of God’s plan, at least as far as Abram could see. A miracle was required for the promises to be completely fulfilled because Sarai remained incapable of bearing children (11:30,16:1) and providing Abram with the necessary son and heir; indeed, God had remained completely silent on the whole matter for ten years (16:3)! Abram had demonstrated faith and God had counted it as righteousness, but he now had to prove that faith in the matter of having a son (as prophesied by God in the vision - 15:4), and this would depend upon Sarai.

We do not know how much Sarai knew of Abram’s experiences or the promises God had been given him, but it is reasonable to believe that there was a close relationship between the two of them, as of a man and a woman who were ‘one flesh’ (Gen 2:24). Certainly, Sarai came swiftly to the forefront of the narrative in chapter 16 with her own forceful solution to the whole problem, and she was the one who proposed surrogacy, not Abram! However, this solution was entirely normal in Abram’s day, and Abram went along with it. He had sex with Sarai’s maid Hagar, and she became pregnant. The consequences of all this were immediate, and complex (16:5,6); as we shall see in the main Bible study. What happened may have been socially acceptable but it led to domestic chaos, sharp words and considerable unpleasantness, to the point that Hagar, still pregnant with Abram’s child and heir, ran away (16:6).

This is a story in need of some salvation, and it illustrates Abram’s key remaining failings and the lack of faith which was still there between him and the Lord. God did sort out the mess, but the consequences of what happened never went away. Abram’s faith would have to rise to greater heights!

Going Deeper

- The events – what happened?
- The story looks back

- Hagar's plight

This story is fairly straightforward, but we can learn a great deal not just by looking deeper at the story itself, but by looking back in the story of Abraham and also back in even older stories of Genesis. As we do this, we will find that we understand even more about how God works through flawed people to do His will, as in Abram and Sarai.

The events - what happened?

There are many ancient documents bearing testimony to the practice of surrogacy, and it was a common practice in ancient times. It was a straightforward way of dealing with a problem which was relatively common. In ancient times, because of the high infant mortality rate, many children were needed within one family in order to ensure that the extended family unit would survive; the smaller a family unit became, the less viable it was in the harsh environments of the day without our modern comforts and technologies. It was common for a 'senior wife' to grant her husband sexual access to a maid so that children would be born to extend a family, particularly if male children were required to strengthen the line of descendants. Indeed, we can read a story which illustrates this perfectly later on in Genesis, in the story of Jacob (Genesis 29-31) who had two wives, Rachel and Leah, and also had children also through their servant girls Bilhah and Zilpah. All the children together from all four women made up the famous twelve 'children of Israel'.

The problem Sarai had was that as soon as Hagar 'looked at her with contempt' (16:4), she was compromised as Abram's 'senior wife'. These words in Hebrew are somewhat strong and indicate a clear attempt on Hagar's part to be seen as the bearer of Abram's only child and heir, and therefore as Abram's foremost wife. Indeed, because her position in the extended family had been enhanced because of her pregnancy, Abram now had a special responsibility to take care of her as the bearer of his child. Previously, of course, she was only Sarai's responsibility and Sarai could do with her what she pleased. Now everything had changed and the stakes were high; Abram was a wealthy man and his inheritance was no small matter.

Because of all this, Sarai lost her temper with Abram (16:5) using words that were close to that of a curse ('may the Lord judge between you and me'), but the end result was that Abram did as Sarai wished and instead of taking care of Hagar himself, he placed Hagar back under Sarai's control, with tragic consequences (16:6).

Clearly, the whole story can be summarised as the compromising of God's plan of salvation by the impatience and sin of Sarai and Abram and their assumption that they were able to sort out the apparent gap in God's plan and his personal promises to them. They clearly felt that they had a responsibility to do what people normally did, and bear children naturally, believing this was the way God would bless them and bring about the fruition of His promise. They were wrong, because He would only complete his plan through a different kind of faith; not faith in the way things normally worked, but faith in the power of God to achieve His will whatever the circumstances. Abram and Sarai were not yet ready.

If we look back in Genesis, however, we will discover a number of things which help us unlock a few more details of the story, and serve to illustrate what happened.

The story looks back

There are a number of features of the story that remind us of Abram's not very helpful escapade in going straight to Egypt after arriving in the Promised Land (12:10-20). Firstly, the maid servant of Sarai, Hagar, was a servant girl from Egypt, and it is reasonable to assume that she was one of those who joined Abram's entourage in Egypt and stayed with him and Sarai as Pharaoh sent Abram on his way. (12:16,20). Secondly, there is a hint of sarcasm in Sarai's voice as she rounded on Abram after she discovered that Hagar was trying to usurp her position. When she said 'you are to blame for this outrage against me', we wonder why Sarai would say such a thing, bearing in mind that it was she who had made the suggestion that Abram 'go in' to Hagar in order to get her pregnant in the first place! Sarai's trouble was that when her position as Abram's wife was placed in jeopardy, it reminded her of what had happened once before in Egypt (12:10-20), which was certainly Abram's fault! On that occasion he had passed her off as his sister! Now in her outrage (16:5), Sarai called on God to judge between them as husband and wife; it was the sharp challenge of a woman who felt usurped both by her husband and her slave; the woman she had hoped would keep her place and hand her child over. Within a close relationship such as marriage, what is said when things go wrong will often relate to more than just the current issue and dig up the past!

The second important thing to notice is that the actions of Sarai are reported to us using language that is very similar to the manner in which Eve tempted Adam (3:17). Eve 'took' the fruit and 'gave' it to Adam. Further, Adam ate, and did as he was told by his wife without comment. The same Hebrew words for 'take' and 'gave' are emphasised in verse 3 of our story today, which does not tell us anything more than what we learned in the previous verse, but merely constructs what happened around these two verbs, and makes the links with Adam and Eve. So Abram, like Adam, sinned through listening to his wife instead of God. Abram

continued to act as a rather compliant husband, for his only other deed in the whole passage, apart from getting Hagar pregnant, was to grant Sarai's request for control of Hagar.

It is important to note that this mocking of Adam and Abram as men who were unable to 'stand up' to their wives should not be over interpreted. There is no hint, for example, that it was wrong in principle for Abram to do what Sarai told him to do. What was wrong was for Abram to do this instead of maintaining his own faith in God. The man's fault was not in his attitude towards his wife, rather, his wife had exposed his lack of faith and discernment through not listening to the voice of God. Later on in the story of Abram and Sarai, God had to tell Abram to listen to the voice of his wife (21:12), so it is wrong to presume that wives are less important to a man than his relationship with God, for example.

Hagar's plight

There is an ancient law code called the Ur-Nammu text from around 2,000 BC, which says that any servant-girl who tries to usurp the position of her mistress should have 'her mouth scoured with one quart of salt'! It would not be an exaggeration to say that this kind of mistreatment is what is implied by the strong Hebrew word for 'ill-treatment' used in verse 6, describing how Sarai dealt with Hagar. The same word is used in Exodus to refer to the ill-treatment of the Israelites by the Egyptians (itself a paradoxical linguistic 'coincidence')! The truth is that is Abram sinned in this story, so did Sarai. Her ill-treatment of Hagar casts as much a shadow on her as Abram's lack of faith does on him.

Because of this mistreatment, it is quite clear that the sympathy of the writers of this scripture now lay with Hagar, who despite her contempt of Sarai, did not deserve the harsh treatment she received. Hagar understandably ran away from Abram and Sarai; he would not look after her even though she was bearing his child, and Sarai ill-treated her. Even this potential heir to Abram was now all but lost because of Abram and Sarai's inadequacies. We will read tomorrow of how God dealt with this.

Discipleship

Application

Proverbs 30:21-23 says 'under three things the earth trembles, under four it cannot bear up ... a maidservant who displaces her mistress.' One wonders whether this proverb was written as a reflection on the story of Abram, Sarai and Hagar! The problem was that the two main parties in this story failed to put a brake on a sequences of events that once started, could not be stopped. Once a child is conceived, it will be born, and the child in Hagar's womb was a child of Abram. Because of this story, the New Testament equates Hagar's child to religion that is the product of human ideas, or 'of the flesh' (see Galatians 4:22ff), and after reading this passage, we all know that the Lord's will can only come about now through God's miraculous intervention. When human solutions are applied to God's , plans, the result is usually catastrophic!

The whole sorry tale sets the backcloth for the further amazing stories of God's work through both of them. If Abram was led to greater heights of faith after his previous failure in Egypt (12:10-20), then we can expect that he will now be led even higher in the stories to come. All of us who read this story will recognise that both Sarai and Abram are people used by God but also deeply flawed people, just like ourselves. The fact that God used them despite their failures, and also that they learned from their mistakes (as the future chapters tell us), give us great hope. The stories of the great people of the Old Testament are a great help to us precisely because they show how God uses flawed people, and it is possible that if people are steeped in the New Testament without knowing the Old, then they lack this sense of the working of God through ordinary people. Some Christians present a picture of faith as being so perfect that many people do not feel able to aspire to what it means, and they can be greatly blessed by seeing how the Lord leads people step by step to the greater things of the Kingdom of God, for example.

Questions for groups

1. Are there any social circumstances in which surrogacy could be justified?
2. Make a list of the things that Abram and Sarai do wrong in this story. To what extent is your list similar to the behaviour of people today?
3. Place yourself in the position of God and try to imagine what he must have felt as this story unfolded.

Discipleship challenges

- *What does this passage tell you about the relationship between men and women? Some say that Abram is a 'real' character in Genesis, but that we know very little about Sarai. Would you say this is true?*
 - *Find a couple who you regard as being one of the best examples of Christian marriage in your church, and ask them about what it is that enables them to maintain their faith and their marriage.*
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Final Prayer

Lord Jesus, help us all to be patient with life. If things do not go well today, may we offer them to You and wait on tomorrow for better. If people have frustrated us today, may we be refreshed tomorrow and have the staying power to remain calm with them. In this way, translate a small part of our faith into action; through Jesus Christ our Lord; AMEN
