

**Genesis 16:1-16 (1984)**  
***God's Word in God's Way***

**Introduction**

One childhood event that I still remember very clearly is something I did when I was about six years old.

I was staying with my maternal grandma in Geylang, and attending a kindergarten about 5 km away. Grandma would bring me to class every day, and when I finished class, she would be there to take me home.

But one day, grandma was late in meeting up with me after class. When I stepped out of the classroom, she was not there to greet me. I panicked because I had always expected to see her without fail after class. I cried in my heart, "Why is grandma not here? Why must she leave me behind?"

After a while, I decided that I would walk my way home. Surprisingly, the kindergarten staff did not notice me, probably because there were too many people around. So I stepped out of the kindergarten and onto the main road. As I retraced my way home, I tried to look out for familiar landmarks, and recall from memory when to turn and where to turn.

The sun was hot and the traffic was heavy. I attracted some curious looks from some people, but none stopped to ask if I was lost and needed help. Even though I walked on quietly, I felt myself crying in my heart, "Help! I think I am lost!"

It seemed like an eternity before I finally saw a familiar building that would guide me to grandma's house. With a sense of joy and relief, I then skipped my way along. And guess who I met at one of the intersections?

It was grandma! Her face was pale like a ghost because she could not find me when she reached the kindergarten, and no one could tell her what had happened to me.

When she saw me, she was a picture of mixed emotions—joy, relief and anger all mixed into one. With her mouth, she was scolding me loud and clear; yet with her embrace, she was telling me how overjoyed she was to see me.

This is one of those adventurous things I did as a 6-year-old—adventurous but foolish. And I am telling this little episode in my life to illustrate the fact that delay can sometimes drive us to do something foolish.

Gen. 16 is an account of how the apparent delay of God's promise to Abram results in a folly as he tries to do God's work in man's way. The basic lesson here is not to teach that God will always bless married couples with children. But the basic lesson here must be understood in the context of the covenantal promise first declared by God to Abram in Gen. 12:2-3—"I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

This covenantal promise given to Abram has to do with the promise that through him, a great nation will arise; and through this nation, all nations of the world will be blessed. It is about blessing for humankind, not about babies for all married couples. In this context, the basic lesson in Gen. 16 is to teach us that when we try to fulfil God's plans with our fleshly methods, we often run into many complications in life. The basic lesson in Gen. 16 is to teach and caution us about the folly of NOT doing God's work in God's way; of trying to fulfil God's promise or purpose with our human plan.

As we reflect on the account in Gen. 16, we want to first look at Sarai, the wife of Abram.

### **I. The Folly of Sarai (vv. 1-2b)**

For a start, let's back-track a little to Gen. 15. Perhaps one of the happiest moments in the life of Abram is found here. He lamented before God, "You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir" (15:3). In reply, God promised him that "a son coming from your own body will be your heir" (15:4). Not only that, God further promised Abram that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars, and his land would extend far and wide—pointing to the covenantal promise of the blessing of righteousness for all who would believe with the faith of Abram (15:5).

It is against this background of God's wonderful promise that Gen. 16:1 sounds like a bad joke—"Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children ...". This statement of barrenness is an anti-climax in view of the great experience and expectation of Abram in Gen. 15. Some 10 years had passed since God's promise was given; Sarai was almost 75 years old. Yet she remained barren without child. What a discouragement!

"Barrenness" is often a discouraging word—it means fruitless labour even with all our faithful efforts. Indeed, the surest way to be drained and worn out is not so much to work hard and long, but to see no difference after working so hard and long. What is even more sad is when people try to bear fruit in God's work by doing their best, but to do so only in the flesh. In other words, they try to do God's work in their own way with their fleshly best. It is as if God needs them to help Him achieve what He is supposed to do, or only He himself can do.

This seems to be on the mind of Sarai as she proposed her solution to her barrenness to Abram. It was as if she was saying to Abram, "The Lord has

promised us a son. But something is keeping Him from fulfilling it. Perhaps, let's give Him a helping hand; let's do it our way—the way we see as best. Go and sleep with my maid Hagar.”

This was a reasonable option humanly speaking. It was socially acceptable in that time for a maid to bear a child for her master if the mistress was barren. Moreover, the Lord had only promised Abram that he would have a son “coming from your own body”—i.e. the Lord did not specify that this child would come through Sarai (at least up to this point in time). Thus, Sarai's solution would not only seem reasonable, but also praiseworthy. Imagine sharing your husband's affection with another woman. What personal sacrifice! Thus, it seems that her idea to use the social customs of the time to fulfil the promise of God was a reasonable, praiseworthy, and viable option.

But her idea was folly in the sight of God. For one thing, it arose out of a self-centred motive to fulfil her own desire rather than the promise of God. It was folly because the result was not Isaac the son of the promise, but Ishmael the son of the flesh. This in turn resulted in the Israeli-Arab conflict that is still going on today. It was perhaps the worst thing that Sarai ever did in her life.

Thinking that God had kept her from having a child, she decided to claim the promised son in her own way. She offered her maid Hagar to her husband, thinking that she “can build a family through her” (16:26). She tried not merely to help God, but really to play God and ended up with Ishmael the son of the flesh, not Isaac the son of the promise. In her impatience, she tried to do God's work in her own way.

My wife was working in a private medical clinic at one time. The partners of this group practice decided to throw a grand banquet in a hotel to celebrate its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

I was invited to attend and since it was a very formal, coat-and-tie event. I decided to try on the black suit that I had not worn for a long while. I had the bed-room light on, and as I put on my black suit, I noticed that my waist was getting too big for the pants. I then remember having another pair of black pants. So I put on that pair of pants together with the black jacket, and looked at myself in the mirror. This pair of pants fitted me well and seemed to match the jacket very well too.

On the day of the grand banquet, I put on that combination of jacket and pants. As I stepped out of the house and into the bright daylight, I discovered that black colour comes in different shades. And I was wearing two shades of black—one for my jacket and the other for my pants! My bed-room light had deceived me to think that they matched very well.

My point here is this—man-made light can be deceiving. In the darkness of her own barrenness, Sarai tried to see her situation in the light of her own fire. She was so desperate to see light in her situation that she

decided to light her own fire. Her own fire failed to fulfil the work or purpose of God—you might say she played with fire and eventually got burnt. Her decision resulted in Ishmael and not Isaac; in frustration and not fulfilment.

What is the most dangerous thing to do when things are not going well? It is not to quit. But it is to do it all in our own way—we say to ourselves, “Now it all depends on me or us!” So, we do anything to get out of the darkness of our own barrenness. We light our own fire, wanting to get out of the darkness of our own barrenness. And we forget one very important thing—i.e. some things can only be clearly seen in darkness (like the bright stars shining in a dark sky).

Perhaps God is wanting you and me to see and learn something clearly in the darkness of our own barren situation today.

- What is it?
- Are we seeing?
- Are we learning?
- Are we desperately trying to get out of our own darkness without any desire to see and learn?

Even in the darkness of our own barren situation, let us learn to do God’s work in God’s way. Let us not play God and light our own fire and get burnt, but to plea to God to show us His light—to grant us patience to wait, clarity to watch, and courage to work out His purposes in His way and time.

Sarai, not Hagar, was purposed to bear Isaac. There was to be no substitute for Sarai in this role. In the same way, God has a specific role for each of us in church and wherever He has placed us. What is God’s role for you? Perhaps God is telling you, “I have a role for you in my plan. I want you to be my servant to do it, and not look for a substitute to do it.”

From the folly of Sarai, let us now switch our attention to ...

## **II. The Folly of Abram (vv. 2c-6)**

We see that Abram fared no better—he “agreed to what Sarai said” (v. 2c). He should have known better and checked the situation. But he was all too ready to say “yes” to Sarai. Both Abram and Sarai were desperately seeking to satisfy their one common desire—they both greatly desired to have a son. So, they both agreed to take the way of practical convenience, not the way of patient faith. The end is all that is important—it does not matter even if the means to that end is not right before God.

Yes, like Sarai, Abram chose the way of practical convenience, not the way of patient faith. Convenience would lead him to personal happiness—he could not rest happy unless and until he had a son. He did not choose the way of patient faith that would lead him to personal holiness. Happiness is promised by many sources while holiness comes from God. Abram chose happiness before

holiness, and he lost his direction to God's way. The result was Ishmael the son of the flesh, not Isaac the son of the promise.

The danger of practical convenience is that the quick-fix way is often mistaken as God's way. Attempts to achieve instant and overnight successes have often brought more pain than gain; more grief than relief. Efforts to take time to work things out are undermined by the desire for a quick-fix formula. The folly of Abram was that by saying "yes" to his own desire for a son, he rested his hope on a flawed quick-fix idea that was mooted by his wife. It paved the way for more frustration and conflict to come in the days ahead. When Hagar the maid eventually conceived, she became arrogant and this brought about much animosity between her and Sarai, as well as disharmony in Abram's home (v. 4).

In turn, Sarai became unreasonable when she complained to Abram in v. 5, "You are responsible for the wrong I am suffering." In other words, "It's all your fault because you agreed with my plan!" Poor Abram must be the most unhappy father-to-be when he said to Sarai in v. 6, "Do with her whatever you think best." In other words, "This is your problem, not mine!"

So, we see not a picture of fulfilment and happiness in Abram's home. Rather, we see frustration, disharmony, and blame-shifting. Indeed, the quick-fix way is often not God's way. Important things like strong spirituality, good relationships, and winning the lost cannot come about overnight. God's way often takes time. Schemes to achieve overnight successes are often dangerous and deceiving.

In the face of delayed answers or happenings, I wonder how we perceive God to be. I once saw a wooden replica of a certain deity. It had many hands. In each hand, there's a certain tool—e.g. a spear in one hand and a shield in another. This image seems to portray the deity as one who can do many things for you according to your desires. I call it a god of efficiency—what you desire is what you will get from this god.

But the Bible portrays our Lord Jesus Christ in a different light—just one pair of hands holding no tools. A pair of empty, out-stretched hands nailed onto the cross. Yet on these seemingly powerless hands rest the power that has created and sustained the whole universe. And the Bible calls us to trust in the one to whom these hands belong in the face of many delayed answers or happenings in life. We are not to be so impatient with delays that we decide to do things our own way ... but end up trusting in ourselves, and not in Him who loved us so much that He willingly laid down His life for us. Yes, the Bible calls us to worship not a god of efficiency, but the God of sufficiency. A god of efficiency can be anyone or anything, so long as we get from what we desire and get it quick. The danger here is that we may end up with Ishmael, not Isaac; with frustration and futility, not fulfilment and fruitfulness.

Lastly and briefly, we move on to look at Hagar and examine what we can learn from her in our text today.

### III. The Faith of Hagar (vv. 7-16)

To be clear, the pregnant Hagar was no angel herself. In her arrogance, she despised her barren mistress. So Sarai treated her harshly in retaliation, and Hagar had to flee to the desert. There, she was confronted by the angel of the Lord who told her to “go back to your mistress and submit to her” (v. 9). She was not to run away from her situation, but to face it squarely with a changed attitude towards Sarai. Hagar responded by calling the Lord as the “God who sees me” in v. 13. She believed that the Lord saw her need and situation. She believed she had a helper in the Lord. So Hagar returned and submitted to her mistress Sarai. She made this decision not in the flesh, but in faith—faith in God to be her helper for He could see and act accordingly to her need and situation.

There are times in life when the right thing to do is to stick it out in our adverse situation with the right attitude. God may not want us to run away. He may want us to go back and submit; to be vulnerable so that we will learn to depend on Him and not on ourselves; to see Him straightening things out in our adverse situation. Indeed, the Lord sees us and knows what we are going through.

When Hagar’s child was born, Abram named him “Ishmael” and it means “God hears” (v. 15). In the prologue in 16:1, we are told that “Sarai bore Abram no children” and in the epilogue in 16:16, we are told that “Hagar bore Abram Ishmael”. Therefore, the promised birth of Isaac was still not fulfilled for Abram. But by naming Hagar’s son as “Ishmael” (i.e. “God hears”), it seems that Abram was reminding himself to keep believing in God’s promise to him, believing that God was still “hearing” his fervent prayer for the promised son. And henceforth, Abram should know better—i.e. he’s to cry out for help to the hearing God, and not try to do God’s work in his own human way.

### Conclusion

What does this account in Gen. 16 have to do with us as God’s people today?

- i. Firstly, it affirms for us that God is still faithful and committed to us, and His work in and through us just as He has been so many years ago in spite of whatever barrenness or fruitlessness we may be experiencing now. God was faithful and committed to His promise to Abram in spite of the barrenness of Sarai. So let us respond to God today with renewed faith in Him.
- ii. Secondly, Gen. 16 reminds us that we are to always pray and work in dependence on the Lord. He is the God who sees our challenges and who hears our cries. So let us seek His forgiveness today for our lack of patience in Him that may have driven us to careless actions of self-dependence.
- iii. Thirdly, Gen. 16 cautions us that to do God’s work in God’s way, we are not only to work for God, but also to work with God. By “conspiring” to fulfil God’s promise of a son in their own way, Abram and Sarai might

seem to be working for God. But they were clearly not working with God because the result was Ishmael, not Isaac the promised son. Indeed, we in the flesh tend to run ahead of God, thinking that we can somehow help Him by doing our human best. But we cannot please God by doing God's work in our own fleshly way even with our human best. So let us pray for wisdom to do God's work in God's way, seeking Him to also keep us hopeful and patient in what He has started in and through us.

Let us seek God:

- To help us renew our faith in Him for He is ever faithful and committed to us.
- To forgive us for we have so often doubt Him seeing and hearing as He watches over us that we run to do things in our human way.
- To grant us His wisdom to do His work in His way as we exercise patience to wait and courage to act in His time.

Amen!