“RUNNING AHEAD OF GOD”

(Genesis 16:1-16)

One of our favorite things to do growing up in the country was to go four wheelin’. Most of my friends in high school had access to four-wheel drive trucks and we’d go find back roads in the mountains – preferably steep roads with a lot of mud – and try to conquer them with our trucks. More often than not the roads conquered us and we’d spend half the day getting ourselves unstuck.

One my friends named Mike had a little souped-up Volkswagen Baja Bug that he thought could do anything a truck could do, and one day he and another friend were up in the mountains just a few miles from our house and he got his VW high-centered going down a dirt road. His friend decided to hike down the mountain and get some help while Mike stayed with his car.

His friend showed up at our house and my dad and I got in our International Scout four-wheel-drive, along with some cables, and headed out to help Mike. When we got to where Mike was, the VW was no longer there and Mike had this ashen look on his face. He said he got tired of waiting and tried to push the car off himself. He put it in neutral and pushed as hard as he could. As you can probably guess, he hadn’t thought about what would happen once the car was no longer stuck. It started heading downhill and he started chasing it, but could only watch as it picked up speed and headed over a ravine and crashed into a tree. It took a bit of thinking and engineering to retrieve his car, but we all learned an important lesson: Wait for help and don’t do something stupid.

All of us encounter times when we get stuck, when we face problems we can’t solve, and we’re desperately looking for a way out of our situation. The longer our problem lingers the more impatient we become and we feel the impulse to do something, do anything, to resolve our issue – and only end up making matters worse. We’ve all been there, and we need a fresh reminder to slow down and look for what God is trying to teach during these times of waiting. We want a quick solution to our problems, but God is more interested in developing our character and deepening our trust in Him.

This is nowhere better illustrated than in our story today in Genesis 16 where Abraham and Sarah grow weary of waiting for God and make a rushed decision that will have repercussions for years to come. The chapter is divided into two sections, each with a main thought. The main thought in the first six verses is: Wait for God’s help and don’t take matters in to your own hands. The main thought in the final ten verses is: God comforts us when we suffer the consequences of running ahead of Him.

One of the major tensions in the life of Abraham is the lack of a child. God promised Abraham and Sarah that they would have descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky – too many to count. But ten years have gone by and there’s still no child. Ten years is a long time, and each year that rolls by only adds pressure and frustration. What is God waiting for? What’s the hold up? They’re not getting any younger, and the window of opportunity for God to act is closing rapidly. Sarah’s frustration grows to the point where she decides to do something – do anything – to have a child and comes up with a plan.

Verses 1-2a, “Now Sarai, Abram’s wife, had borne him no children. But she had an Egyptian slave named Hagar; so she said to Abram, ‘The Lord has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my slave; perhaps I can build a family through her.’”

Our eyes kind of pop out when we read about Sarah’s proposed solution – what wife in her right mind tells her husband to sleep with someone else and have their child? In ancient culture not having an heir for a man was unthinkable – passing on your name, your heritage, and your possessions was all-important.

For a woman, being childless was a sign of shame, while having a child was a sign of blessing. A woman’s purpose and worth was wrapped up in having children, and if she was unable to conceive it was customary in the culture of the time for her to give one of her servant girls to her husband as a concubine – or second wife – and the children born to the concubine would be considered her children.

While this was not an outlandish idea according to the customs of the day, it obviously is not God’s solution – He made it clear from the beginning of creation that marriage was an exclusive relationship between a man and a woman, and no one else was allowed into that one-flesh covenant bond.

Sarah voices her frustration with God… “The Lord has kept me from having children.” That’s true, but it doesn’t mean that God is not going to give her children – He has promised to do so, He just hasn’t said when. But Sarah is tired of waiting… “If God isn’t coming through, I need to take things into my own hands.” She has an Egyptian slave named Hagar, who was given to Abraham by Pharaoh back in chapter 12 as part of the dowry package for proposing marriage to Sarah.

Instead of putting her hope in God, Sarah puts her hope in Hagar, who three different times in this chapter is referred to as “the Egyptian.” It’s important to remember that Moses wrote the book of Genesis after the exodus of Israel from Egypt and are on their way back to the Promised Land, and one of the temptations of the exodus generation was to go back to Egypt. Whenever something went wrong on their journey to the Promised Land, the people would grumble and say, “If we could just go back to Egypt – at least we had food there and a place to sleep – out here we have nothing.” When God doesn’t seem to come through, the temptation is always to go back to Egypt, and going back to Egypt becomes a metaphor for not trusting in God – but trusting in our own wisdom and taking matters into our own hands. And that’s exactly what Sarah does here – she puts her trust in an Egyptian slave rather than in God.

Sarah brings her idea up to Abraham, and we’re prepared for him to say, “What are you thinking? We can’t do that.” But he doesn’t. Verse 2b-4a says, “Abram agreed to what Sarai said. So after Abram had been living in Canaan ten years, Sarai his wife took her Egyptian slave Hagar and gave her to her husband to be his wife. He slept with Hagar, and she conceived.”

The wording in these verses sounds familiar. They are the same words used in garden of Eden when it says, “Eve *took* of the fruit of the tree and ate, and *gave* some to her husband and he ate.” Now we read that “Sarai *took* Hagar and *gave* her to her husband to be his wife.” In Genesis 3 it says that Adam *listened* to the voice of Eve, and here it says that Abraham *listened* to the voice of Sarah.

What’s going on in Genesis 16 is a reenactment of the fall. Sarah, like Eve, sees something that she desires and she takes and gives it to her husband – and Abraham, like Adam, stands by passively and joins in rebellion. In both stories, the participants talk themselves into doing something wrong because they believe it will lead to something good – but in both cases, they discover – quite painfully – that going outside of God’s order and design leads to disaster.

It's always a good idea for husbands to listen to their wives, but in this case – when Abraham hears the voice of Sarah – he should have stopped and said, “This is not the voice of God. This is a different voice – a different solution – a human solution – this is running to Egypt for help.” Abraham, who had been so bold and wise in rescuing Lot in chapter 14, now folds under pressure from his wife.

As the spiritual leader of his family, he should have put his arm around Sarah and say, “I see what you’re thinking, honey. I hear you, but this isn’t the way we should go. I’m frustrated too, but we’ve got to hang tight and wait on God to fulfill His promise.” But just like Adam abdicated his spiritual authority went along with Eve, Abraham does the same with Sarah.

Verse 4 says, “He slept with Hagar, and she conceived. When she knew she was pregnant, she began to despise her mistress.” It’s easy to see Hagar as the innocent victim in this story – and she is – yet after she is wronged, she does wrong herself by despising Sarah. The word “despise” is the very same word used in Genesis 12:3 when God promised Abraham that He would bless those who bless you, and curse those who curse you. What Hagar is doing here is a form of cursing Sarah – she is dishonoring the one through whom God has chosen to be the mother of His chosen people – and now that Hagar is pregnant, she feels superior to Sarah and ridicules her – and in doing so puts herself on the outside of God’s blessing.

One author put it this way, “Sinners respond sinfully to being sinned against.” That is so true, and that’s what Hagar does – she been sinned against – she’s a pawn in this scheme – and yet she responds with her own sin to the sin that’s been done against her. This is what sinners do.

In the meantime, Sarah gets just what she wants – Hagar conceives a child – but she quickly realizes it was not what she wanted at all. Isn’t that true of life? You spend time and money and effort in trying to get something you think will make you happy, but when you get it, you’re worse off than before.

One of the fallouts of Sarah’s plan is that it creates a rift between her and Hagar… who didn’t see that coming? In our culture of casual sex, the powerful bond that sex creates between two people is overlooked. God created sex as the glue to bond husband and wife together as one flesh – physically, emotionally, and spiritually – and when sex takes place outside the one-flesh covenant of marriage, it is destructive and leaves lasting consequences. That’s why on these TV shows about polygamous marriages, there’s always jealousy and competition between wives because God designed marriage to be exclusive, and when His design is violated, there is always pain and trouble.

Sarah’s plan not only causes a rift between her and Hagar, but between her and Abraham. In verses 5-6… “Then Sarai said to Abram, ‘You are responsible for the wrong I am suffering. I put my slave in your arms, and now that she knows she is pregnant, she despises me. May the Lord judge between you and me.’ ‘Your slave is in your hands,’ Abram said. ‘Do with her whatever you think best.’ Then Sarai mistreated Hagar; so she fled from her.”

After getting Abraham to go along with her idea, she doesn’t like the results and blames Abraham… “It’s your fault – you let this happen.” And she’s partly right. Abraham could have and should have stopped it, but he didn’t step up and lead. Now Sarah wants him to do something about Hagar and her haughty attitude, and once again Abraham becomes passive. By taking Hagar as a second wife – and as the father of her child – he has a responsibility to protect her and provide for her, but he shoves her right back to Sarah and says, “Do whatever you want with her.” Abraham values peace over doing what’s right.

With Abraham’s permission, Sarah proceeds to mistreat Hagar. “Mistreat” is the same word used to describe the Egyptians mistreatment of the Israelites. Sarah treats Hagar cruelly and harshly, until Hagar finally has enough and runs away.

While the lesson in verses 1-6 is wait for God to help and to not make matters worse by running ahead of God, the lesson in verses 7-16 is that God ministers to us when we do run ahead of Him and face the consequences of our actions. In verse 7 the focus of the story shifts to Hagar… “The angel of the Lord found Hagar near a spring in the desert; it was the spring that is beside the road to Shur.”

Hagar is on the road between Canaan and Egypt, and it’s clear that she’s going back to Egypt. She was under the blessing of Abraham, but now she’s going back to Egypt – just like the children of Israel wanted to go back to Egypt. She puts herself in a very vulnerable position – she’s all alone out in the middle of a desert and she’s pregnant. She hasn’t packed anything and hasn’t thought through how she’ll make it to Egypt. There’s a good chance that she’s going to die in the desert.

As she rests near a spring, a visitor suddenly appears – the angel of the Lord. Whenever the phrase “angel of the Lord” is used in the Old Testament it refers to deity, and most scholars believe that the angel of the Lord is a theophany – an appearance of God in physical form. Some believe, for good reasons, that the angel of the Lord is an appearance of Jesus Christ before His incarnation.

What stands out is that the Lord finds Hagar – He seeks her out. She’s out in the middle of a desert, alone and desperate, and the angel of the Lord finds her. It’s a beautiful picture of the gospel, and how from the beginning – in the garden of Eden – God seeks out sinners. In our hopeless situation, He takes the initiative in reaching out to us. The ultimate example is when Jesus left the glory of heaven to come to us, and as Luke 19:10 says, “He came to seek and to save those who were lost.” He is the one who leaves the 99 sheep to go find the one lost sheep and bring it home. And He comes to find a pregnant slave girl all alone in the desert.

Verse 8… “And he said, ‘Hagar, slave of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going?’ ‘I’m running away from my mistress Sarai,’ she answered.” Whenever God asks questions of people in the Bible it is not to get information from them, but to get them to think about their situation. Jesus asked over 300 questions of people in the gospels – questions that got to the heart of the issue and provoked a response or change. The angel asks Hagar two questions – where have you come from and where are you going? She answers the first question – she knows where she came from and all that’s happened, but she isn’t sure about where she’s going or what the future holds.

Verse 9… “Then the angel of the Lord told her, ‘Go back to your mistress and submit to her.’” Why would the Lord tell Hagar to go back to mistreatment – to go back and submit to the one who mistreated her? It’s because God wants to bless her, and blessing is found in being part of the family through whom Jesus will come. God said in Genesis 12 that “I will bless those who bless you and I will curse those who curse you.” Hagar’s hope is not in Egypt, but in the God of Abraham. Abraham and Sarah are flawed people, and Hagar doesn’t put her hope in them but in promises of God they have been given.

“Go back to Sarah and submit to her.” Really? Submit to her? We bristle at the word submission, but submission is the way to blessing – submission first to God and then submission to those God has put over us. The reason many people struggle in life is because they have a habit of resisting and running from submission. As teenagers they don’t like their parent’s rules, so they rebel. They get a job and can’t get along with their boss, so they quit. They get married and have conflict, so they walk away from it. They seek counseling, but they don’t like what the counselor tells them, so they either quit or else look for a counselor who agrees with them. They join a church, but can’t get along with the people or don’t like something, so they find another church.

It's only when we look in the mirror and says, “The problem is me,” that things begin to change. When we realize that God has placed various authorities in our lives to shape and mold us and remove our rough edges – it is then that we can begin to grow and experience God’s blessings.

In verse 10 God promises to bless Hagar… “The angel added, ‘I will increase your descendants so much that they will be too numerous to count.’” By coming back under the blessing God made to Abraham, Hagar is promised blessing beyond her wildest dreams – she, a lowly slave, will be the matriarch of a great nation.

Verse 11… “The angel of the Lord also said to her: ‘You are now pregnant and you will give birth to a son. You shall name him Ishmael, for the Lord has heard of your misery.’” The name Ishmael means, “God hears.” Every time Hagar looks at her son, every time she says the name Ishmael, she will be reminded that the Lord heard her cry for help in the desert and met her there. David wrote in Psalm 34:18, “The Lord is near to the brokenhearted, and saves those who are crushed in spirit.” God cannot help those who are arrogant and self-reliant, but He seeks out those who are lonely and desperate, who are out in the desert and have little hope for a future – He hears their cry and comes to their aid.

But in this story – along with blessing also comes consequences for running ahead of God. God will not be mocked – whatever a man sows, that shall he also reap. Ishmael will indeed become a great nation, but his descendants will be a source of trouble for the promised offspring of Abraham for centuries to come. In verse 12 the angel of the Lord says of Ishmael… “He will be a wild donkey of a man; his hand will be against everyone and everyone’s hand against him, and he will live in hostility toward all his brothers.”

Hagar’s son will be a strong, independent, untamed man – like a wild donkey that’s not restrained. He will be a fighter who will be hostile to his brothers. This prophecy comes true 13 years later in Genesis 21 when Abraham and Sarah will finally have their promised son Isaac, and older brother Ishmael resents his new brother and mocks him. As a result, Hagar and Ishmael will be sent away for good.

Abraham and Sarah’s decision to run ahead of God has lasting consequences in the hostility between Ishmael and Isaac – a hostility that lingers to this day. Ishmael is the father of the Arab people, while Isaac is the father of the Jewish people, and all the problems in the Middle East – all the conflict – can be traced back to the fateful decision of Abraham and Sarah to have a child through Hagar. God is still going to bless them, and He will bless Hagar as well, but they will also have to live out the natural consequences of their actions.

We see this same principle played out all the time. For example, a drug addict comes to faith in Christ and turns his live around – he is a new child in Christ and inherits every spiritual blessing in Christ. While he enjoys the blessings of God, at the same time he must also live with the natural consequences of his drug addiction – which might be liver problems, decayed teeth, or cognitive issues. Abraham and Sarah will reap what they sow for years to come, yet it does not change the grace of God in fulfilling His promises to them.

Hagar’s encounter with the angel of the Lord has a profound effect on her. Verses 13-14… “She gave this name to the Lord who spoke to her: ‘You are the God who sees me,’ for she said, ‘I have now seen the One who sees me.’ That is why the well was called Beer Lahai Roi; it is still there, between Kadesh and Bered.”

Hagar is struck with the fact that God sees her – little old her – a slave, an outcast, a nobody – and comes to her aid and gives her hope. She gives God a name – El Roi – “the God who sees me.” One of our deepest human needs is to be seen – to be recognized. It’s like the little child who says, “Daddy, look at me… look at what I’m doing… do you see me?” They want to know that they matter, they want to know that you see them.

As we get older and feel the effects of living in a fallen world, we want God to notice – to see our pain and suffering and know that He cares and will help us. The Bible says that God the Father not only sees us, but knows the smallest details of our lives.

Jesus said, “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father’s care. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don’t be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows” (Matthew 10:29-30). If the Lord sees a tiny, insignificant bird – out of the billions of birds in the world – and tenderly cares for it, how much more will He see and care for the Hagar’s of the world?

The chapter ends in verses 15-16 by saying, “So Hagar bore Abram a son, and Abram gave the name Ishmael to the son she had borne. Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore him Ishmael.” Hagar went back to Sarah and placed herself under God’s blessing, and Abraham accepted responsibility for his son and gives him the name Ishmael. Everyone in the story learns to live with their mistakes and do the next right thing.

This brings us back to the two main points of this story. The first is the importance of waiting on God and not taking matters in to our own hands. How about you? Are you waiting on God to do something? Are you beginning to scheme and plan how you can solve your problem on your own? If so, remember that waiting is part of God’s plan to develop your character and deepen your trust in Him.

As someone said, “Waiting is not just about what I get at the end of the wait, but about who I become as I wait.” We learn things through waiting that we would otherwise never learn. Our job is slow down, lean into the Lord, and trust Him to solve our problem in His time and His way.

There may be some of you here who have already run ahead of God and are paying the price for your decisions. God wants you to know that you even as you reap the natural consequences of your actions, you can enjoy all His blessings by coming back to Him, repenting of what you’ve done, and submitting to Him. God see you – He sees your situation – He knows all about it – and when you cry out to Him, He hears and He meets you where you are and gives you hope.