

*Introduction:*A. Turn to Gen. 16. **This whole story is a mess.**

Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. But God had promised Abram a son. "*A son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir. ... Look up at the sky and count the stars... So shall your offspring be.*" But Abram was 85 and.... no son. I don't know if anything was ever said, but the burden of barrenness rested rock-heavy on Sarai, who "*had borne him no children.*"

But she had an Egyptian slave named Hagar; ²so 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."

Both slavery and surrogacy were acceptable in those days but you don't have to be Dr. Phil to know that was asking for trouble. Maybe Sarai wouldn't have done it if hadn't been for God's promise. After all, she was 75. I suppose she figured that "God helps those who help themselves."

Abram agreed to what Sarai said. ³So 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**.⁴ He slept with Hagar, and she conceived.

Awkkward! I don't care what culture you're in! All those years with Sarai and then, *what?*, one night with Hagar?

The glances. Blushing. Counting. Pregnant. Oh, so messy!

When she [Hagar] knew she was pregnant, she began to despise her mistress.

Despise—regard lightly. Now the slave is one-up on her mistress. Maybe Hagar made sure Sarai saw her knitting booties, or maybe it was just a superior look in her eyes.

But Hagar knew what she was doing and it stung Sarai.

⁵Then 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."

Chuck Swindoll wrote, “*So now Sarai appeals to the LORD!*” She should have done that back up in verse 1. And now Sarai is on the outs with both Hagar and Abram. Meals must have all been served on ice! Sarai wanted Abram to put Hagar back in her place as a slave. But Hagar was now his *wife* also. Talk about a no-win situation. So messy!

“Your slave is in your hands,” Abram said. “Do with her whatever you think best.” Then Sarai mistreated Hagar; so she fled from her.

“*Your slave*”? What happened to “*my wife*.” So Sarai **mistreats** the mother of Abram’s only child. The Heb. word suggests **humiliating emotional mistreatment**. It gets so bad Hagar runs away. Pregnant and alone. Into the desert. On a seldom used and dangerous road, a kind of wilderness back alley, heading back toward Egypt where no one was waiting for her. Abram left, torn between two lovers. Sarai, bitter and baby-less. Her plan had all gone to pieces. What a mess!

B. None of these three people are all that admirable. Abram comes off as dull and passive, Sarai as a schemer caught in her own faithless and desperate plan, and the hapless Hagar as taking the first chance she gets to lord it over Sarai.

I. FAITHLESSNESS AND FEAR HAVE LED ALL OF US INTO TERRIBLE MESSES (16:1-6)

C. The relational messes of life leave us as lonely, conflicted, and misguided as Hagar; as bewildered as Abram; as sharp-edged and bitter as Sarai. This wasn’t just a messy situation. **These were messy people**. That is what happens when we don’t trust the promises of God and when we live life out of fear or pride; when bitterness oozes from our wounds or when we’re too passive to set things right. **We all have these messes. We’re all messy people.**

And our lives are fouled up by other messy people. Hagar wasn’t blameless (she despised Sarai) but most of this mess was not her doing. It doesn’t appear in the text that she felt victimized by Abram. In fact, she may have seen becoming a wife—even the second wife—of a rich

and God-blessed man was a big step up from being an Egyptian slave. I assume she was thrilled to be pregnant. It was Sarai's humiliating mistreatment of Sarai that she couldn't take any longer.

Illus.: Cody F. Miller based his painting, "Hagar," on these verses. He likens Hagar's experience to the Ralph Ellison's description of an African American's experience in his book, *Invisible Man*. *"I am an invisible man.... I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids—and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me."*

Illus.: A week ago Friday at 7:48 p.m. author **Kelly Oxford**, who has an enormous social media presence, tweeted, *"Women: tweet me your first assaults. These aren't just stats. I'll go first: Old man on city bus..., I'm 12."* According to NPR, *"The responses poured in — not by the dozens or the hundreds, but by the thousands. Strangers on the bus, in the street, on the subway, at a concert. Fathers. Uncles. Baby sitters. Classmates. Teachers. Doctors. Priests. Friends. The women had been 23, or 17, or 11, or 9, or 6. In 140 characters, they expressed shock or the grim absence of surprise. They shared guilt and anger and shame. They told of family members who didn't believe them."* Hagar would've believed them! What terrible messes!

At the Elder Board this week we were talking about how many people—how many of *you*—are lonely. We often wonder what burdens and secrets you carry through these doors.

Yesterday morning, I wrote in my journal that I was feeling anxious and apprehensive and I tried to sort out why. Too much to do before our trip maybe. A couple important things for which I feel unprepared. The election, for sure. Some heartaches that people are facing. I bowed to pray, *"Lord, what do you say to this? What am I missing that I'm feeling this unsettledness, this sadness?"* And God said, *Remember Hagar's story.*

Vv.7-16.... In any Bible story the center is what God says or does. The rest of the story is just the frame for the picture.

II. THE GOD WHO HEARS AND SEES OFFERS REFUGE TO ANYONE WHO SEEKS HIS SHELTER (16:7-16)

Hagar is an outsider—a slave, an Egyptian, a woman, despised. That's important to see because she represents anyone here.

- A. Let's start with the first line of **v.7**, "*The angel of the LORD found Hagar...*" I don't know what Hagar knew about Abram's God. I don't know if she prayed, or if she ever stood at one of Abram's altars to the LORD. But no one ever turns to God whom God hasn't sought first. John wrote, "*We love him because he loved us first.*" In **Ps 139** David sang, "*Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?*" The Good Shepherd will seek you out. The Father will run a long way to meet you.
- B. Here's another thing: God knows you and your future far better than you know yourself. He told Hagar about all the descendants she would have—a promise similar to the one God made to Abram. He knew the baby in her womb was a son—without a sonogram. He knew what that boy's name needed to be. And he knew what that boy would be like. In other words, God knew the shape and the needs of Hagar's life. And so he knows you. He knit each of us together in our mother's womb. He knows the days allotted to us, how many hairs on our head. In that same **Ps 139** David sang, "*How amazing are your thoughts concerning me, God!*"
- C. The center of this word from the LORD is this, "You shall name him Ishmael for the LORD has heard of your misery." Ishmael means *God hears*. Actually, it says, "*the Lord has heard your misery.*" God didn't just hear *of* her misery, as if by messenger or prayer. **God hears our affliction, our misery, as though it has a voice of its own**; the soundless ache of our messed up lives, of relationships gone awry, of heartbreak, of despising and being despised, of babies whose futures will be difficult. *God hears!*

This story would resonate with people hundreds of years later because then the children of Abraham would be the ones in slavery to Egypt. And again, God saw and heard their misery and rescued them. Then, God said to Moses, *“I have seen the misery of my people... I have heard them crying out....and I am concerned about their suffering. So I have come down to rescue them... and to bring them out of that land into a good and spacious land...”* [Ex 3:7-8]

And, of course, these two stories speak like prophets of the coming of Jesus Christ when God heard the misery of people and came down. *“When Jesus saw the crowds he had compassion on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd.”* Jesus said, *“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.”* [Matt 11:28] Peter tells us, *“Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.”* [1 Pet 5:7]

- D. Back in Gen 16:13 Hagar gave God a second name, a name with two meanings, *“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.’”* This is what God says to all who identify with Hagar’s misery, feeling lonely or invisible or homeless. This is what God reminded me. *I am the God who hears your heart cries. I am the God who can be seen in Jesus, “the image of the invisible God,” “God with us,” and I am the God who sees you—even on desert roads, even when we run and hide, even when no one else does.*

Come to Jesus. Run to Jesus. Cry to Jesus. Dance with Jesus. *“He forgives all your sins. He heals all your soul’s diseases. He redeems your life from the pit. He crowns you with love and compassion. He satisfies your desires with good things.”* Come to Jesus.

- E. Why do you think God required Hagar to return to Sarai? Why did she have to go back into the mess? I think it was because the blessing of God rested on the household of Abram, as messy as it was. Later, in **Gen 17**, *“Abraham said to God, ‘If only Ishmael might live under your*

blessing! ’” Abraham loved that boy! And while God’s covenant would be made with Isaac, God said, “And as for Ishmael, I have heard you: I will surely bless him...”

In order to be blessed by God we must be sheltered by the household of God. For us, that means first of all that we must be hidden in Christ, a much safer refuge than Abram’s household was. But I think it also means we must be part of the household of faith. We need to be part of a church because God dwells among his people. The church is the body of Christ. But churches, like Abram’s household, can certainly get messy!

Illus.: I’m talking to a young man who certainly knows Jesus but he’s not been in church for a long time because he thinks “*most [people] don’t seem honest, they put on a happy face and act like everything is amazing, and that’s creepy, like Pleasantville creepy.*” Wow! I’ve told him I don’t think that’s really fair but whether it is or not, the church is where God meets people, it is his household, messy or not.

On the other hand, Traci Crowley wrote me this week, “*I have been reminded this past week of why God has us at VCL. The congregants have come around us so beautifully. And last week I was part of the prayer team up front, along w/ Dave Papritz and Johanan, they both came up to me and prayed such rich prayers. The fellowship and prayers of God’s people mean so much. May I not forget that.*”

God himself will not likely show up in angel clothes for you like he did for Hagar but he shows up unmistakably through his people, the Body of Christ. That’s how we know that God hears and God sees. Remember, too, that you and I are how people realize that God hears and sees them.

- F. Life didn’t get all that much better for Hagar. God’s blessing hides in some dark corners. Once Ishmael was born the tension with Sarai only tightened. And despite his divine name, Ishmael was the kind of kid that breaks a

mother's heart. A "wild donkey" was seen as "fierce and independent with stubborn pride and an untamable spirit" [Baldwin]. I think we'd liken him to a **wild mustang**. But the rough part is all the hostility that would characterize him. There's no way to put a good shine on that. Think of being his mother! Think of being his mother when he was a 2-year old!! God's blessing hides in some dark corners.

- G. I think the remarkable thing about Hagar is that she went back. She obeyed God. There she bore her son and Abram called him his own. Later, when she was driven out of Abram's household God once again met her by a well and rescued her and Ishmael. Then Hagar disappears from the Bible but I'm confident of this: all the rest of her days, whenever she called her son, Ishmael, she heard herself saying, *God hears*; even her wordless misery. And when she prayed to the seemingly silent heavens, she knew she had seen the LORD and that the LORD saw her. He *always* saw her.

And he will always hear you. He will always see you and you can always see him in Jesus.