

When waiting is hard

Genesis 16:1-14

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The story of Hagar, Sarai and Ishmael can at seem confusing to our western sensibilities. It feels rather strange for Sarai to suggest to Abram that he should sleep with her maidservant in order to extend their family line. But this was actually standard practice in ancient Mesopotamia as a solution for infertility, and actually it is still regularly practiced today – except we know it as surrogacy. Surrogacy in the UK has increased 350% over the last decade, mainly driven by older couples and same sex couples wanting children. A recent government report on surrogacy states ‘Debates on the future of UK surrogacy legislation reflect a wide range of views. Some supporters of surrogacy advocate reform to address practical, legal and regulatory challenges within the current framework. Others argue surrogacy should be restricted or prohibited, citing concerns about exploitation, inequality, consent and commodification, particularly in cross-border arrangements (where one party to the arrangement is outside the UK).

Clearly our Bible passage demonstrates that similar concerns have been causing trouble for many thousands of years.

Last week Emma shared how Abram has been called the Father of faith for believing God’s promise that his offspring would be more numerous than the stars in the sky and that all nations would be blessed through them.

But 10 years on from that spiritual highpoint we find Abram and Sarai having a crisis of faith. Instead of patiently waiting, they started to think about engineering their own solution. After all that time, who can blame them? 10 years is a long time to wait. Especially for a couple desperate to have children, it would be unbearable.

But here Abram takes a passive role, while it is Sarai who places temptation in front of him.

Some years ago when I was struggling to find the Lord's guidance over a matter, I remember my training incumbent Andrew telling me: 'If you look at Scripture, most of the really bad decisions people made were not because of inaction but because they jumped God's gun.'

As an engineer, my instinct is to fix, to sort and to problem-solve. I admit I can be impatient. This can sometimes be a blessing as I get stuff done, but spiritually it can also be a curse. It is those who learn to wait on the Lord that will renew their strength.

Abram buckled under pressure and went ahead and agreed to sleep with Hagar in order to produce an heir. But then the problems started. Insecurity, jealousy, competition, violence. Muslim Arabs under Mohammed trace their lineage back to Ishmael whereas the Judeo-Christians revere Isaac as their spiritual ancestor. Clearly, this one decision in Abram's life clearly brought division to the world in a big way. It was another Eden fall.

We all have crises of faith. But instead of telling her husband to stand strong and keep trusting in God's promises, like Eve did in the Garden of Eden, Sarai offered Abram a shortcut which ended up causing heartache and banishment.

The consequences were brutal for Hagar and her baby Ishmael as they had to run away and were finally forced out of the protection and provision of the household.

But the second half of the passage is fascinating because it shows God's grace and faithfulness despite the faithlessness of Abraham sin and domestic abuse which was threatening Hagar and Ishmael's future.

Paul wrote in 2 Tim 2:13:

2 Timothy 2:13

13 'Even if we are faithless, he remains faithful because he cannot be untrue to himself'

Verses 7-15 records the Bible's first encounter of 'The Angel of the Lord' speaking directly to Hagar. So just to summarise the story, the Angel of the Lord appeared to this woman near a well and after prophesying to her spoke of her need to return back to her village to fulfil her destiny.

Ring any bells?

This is so like the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman, I think it is clear that this encounter is the first recorded *Christophany* in the Bible. It points to God in Christ saving a soul in crisis.

It is an indicator that God would not just be interested in blessing his chosen people Israel alone, but Gentiles as well. Yes, there would be inevitable sad and painful conflict along the way, but one day at the fulfilment of the ages, all things will be made new under Christ as he reconciles all creation back to God.

Hagar named God *El Roi* 'You are the one who sees me', foreshadowing the Samaritan woman who said 'come and meet someone who told me everything I ever did'.

God knows our situation and he sees the motivations of our heart and the distresses we go through. There is no greater assurance than the comfort of the Good shepherd even in the valley of the shadow of death.

So, Hagar names the nearby well *Beer Lahai Roi*: 'The well of the living one who sees me'

This is the first of the **wells of God's presence** named in the Bible. A gentile woman, running away from domestic abuse, is refreshed by the presence of the God who sees and reassures.

In Galatians 4 Paul compares Hagar and Sarah as representatives of those who try to earn righteousness through the Jewish law, compared with those who hold on to God's promises through faith. He is making a theological point that in the end it was Abraham and Sarah who were the original founders of faith-based religion, instead of the legalistic religiosity that was threatening to corrupt the Galatian church and still keeps people captive in judgmental shackles today.

And yet nevertheless in the passage we see God's grace to Hagar and kindness meeting her in her distress. God wants all people to return to him to find true freedom and our God-shaped calling. To me Hagar represents all those on the margins who are lost and lonely, like sheep without a shepherd. For those who admit their need and cry out to him, the presence of God is there for them.

Every year millions of Muslims go to Mecca for the Hajj. The Hajj is deeply connected to Hagar (known as *Hajar* in the Islamic tradition), and during the Hajj they reenact Hagar's search for water in the desert.

However, Jesus said:

John 7:37-38

37 'Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. 38 Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them.'

Peter preached in Acts 3:19:

Acts 3:19

19 'Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord'

Jesus said the well of God's presence is not about a particular place, but it is living water for those people who come to him to drink.

All through history there have been times when the wells of refreshing and renewal have flowed freely, and times when the wells have become blocked up. I want to see them flowing 100% freely in our day. But unblocking times of refreshing may take turning to God in repentance.

Last week I attended a conference organised by Resource, one of our mission partners whose aim is to resource and encourage spiritual renewal in UK local churches.

The conference focussed on the past, present and future of charismatic renewal in the UK and it is extraordinary to see the way the church has been changed through organisations like the Fountain Trust, the Vineyard Association, New Wine and Alpha. They taught and demonstrated an openness to the work of the Holy Spirit and encouraged all believers to hold Word the Spirit together whilst engaging in prayer, worship and mission.

During the conference Dr Chloe Lynch from the London School of Theology and a member of St Andrew's Chorleywood shared what I think is a significant prophetic word for the UK Church for today based on Genesis 26:

Genesis 26:18-19, 22

18 Isaac reopened the wells that had been dug in the time of his father Abraham, which the Philistines had stopped up after Abraham died, and he gave them the same names his father had given them.

19 Isaac's servants dug in the valley and discovered a well of fresh water there...

22 He...dug another well and...He named it Rehoboth, saying, 'Now the Lord has given us room and we will flourish in the land.'

Chloe shared that the older generations of our churches have been blessed by wonderful 'wells of God's presence' which were experienced during the charismatic renewal of the past 60 years. From encountering the Holy Spirit in their younger years (worth noting that in one survey the average age of a person experiencing a life-time transformative encounter with the Holy Spirit was 23!), this 'Abraham generation' drew refreshment from those wells of renewal and got on with the task of mission and seeing the church in the UK welcoming the gifts and the fruit of Holy Spirit ministry.

However, along with great blessing and refreshment, the tragedy of abusive leadership, moral and relational failures as well as disappointments along the way have become like rubble blocking up those wells.

Now the Isaac generation are thirsty to see a new move of the Holy Spirit, so we need to do all that we can to both dig new wells and unblock the rubble and mess from the ancient ones.

Chloe felt like the Lord is wanting the older Abraham generation to share their stories of renewal, how they encountered the Holy Spirit and their experiences of what the Lord has done over the past 60 years as the first stage of reopening the ancient wells. Then if the Isaac generation is to receive the blessings of all that is then passed down as an inheritance, these ancient wells also need to be unblocked of all the rubble and mess by repenting of our failures as a Church along the way.

All Saints has experienced great renewal over the past decades. The church encountered the Holy Spirit in powerful ways that have transformed many lives and ministries ever since. But while we have written up booklets about the renewal of our church buildings, I don't think we have written up a full account of spiritual renewal at All Saints in the same way. I think it is time we ask the Abraham generation to tell those stories, trusting that the Lord wants us to go on to dig and reopen wells of renewal here in Bath. There may be some rubble to clear out too, but I think the Lord is wanting us to encourage the Isaac generation - there is plenty of water just below the surface!

I think that if the Abraham generation are willing to share their stories and we work to clear the rubble of past failures, then the Isaac generation can dig new wells of renewal. We will see faith rising, which will provide a new basis for things hoped for - a new wider outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

At the recent APCM I spoke of 2027 being a 'year of opportunity' leading to a 'year of sending' in 2028. As we hear and celebrate what the Lord has done spiritually at All Saints, we have an opportunity to dig new wells and also unblock the ancient wells of God's presence together. As we have been studying the life of Abraham this year I am looking forward to further blessing as we look with faith for his kingdom to come in new and wonderful ways over the coming year. I am delighted that Tim Watson who was Rector here in the 80s and 90s is going to come and celebrate his 60th anniversary of his ministry by coming on October 4th and preaching at the 11am service. I've asked him to share his memories of the Lord's presence building spiritually here at All Saints.

For those in each generation, particularly if you would count yourself in the Abraham generation, please pray and think about sharing your story of encounter with the Holy Spirit or details of a significant event in the spiritual life of All Saints. If you are able to write them in an email then you could send them to our special testimonies email address: testimonies@allsaintsweston.org.uk Perhaps we could then also record some interviews for a special *Renewal at All Saints* podcast!!

Thank you for praying for the continued spiritual growth of All Saints, Weston, Bath and beyond. God is good, and nothing is impossible for him.

Genesis 26:22

22 Isaac dug another well and... he named it Rehoboth, saying, 'Now the Lord has given us room and we will flourish in the land.'



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