

Faith in Crisis

Genesis 16

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Good morning. What a blessing it is to see you! I want to give you a heads up that the passage that we are studying today has some adult content in it. I have done my best to adapt some wording and speak vaguely, but there are some themes that will be discussed. Just know that you are welcome to bring your children to ShoreKids and they will have a Bible story for their age group.

I know that some of you here have a little extra excitement this weekend because this is the first weekend in a long time where it does not end with going to school! How many of you are excited that school is out?

Each one of my kids have shared that it is a little bitter sweet that school is over, but there is nothing but sweet relief coming from the teachers. So, good job to you students for all the hard work this year. And a special thank you to our teachers and all those who work in education: public school, private school, and homeschool for everything you did this year.

I know the conversations will certainly be different around our dinner table over the summer. We often start our conversations by sharing a high and low from our day. And those have mainly been consumed with school activities. So, it will be interesting to see how those conversations shift to other topics over the summer.

I don't think our family has ever had trouble finding content for the conversation about highs and lows. At the end of your days and weeks, you probably wouldn't have trouble either because it is a natural flow of life that we navigate through a connected flow of highs and lows.

Over the past few weeks we have been studying the life of Abraham in our Extraordinary Faith series. And Abraham, the father of our faith, had certainly experienced some highs. God called him to leave his country and his extended family, and travel to a land that God would show him. And by faith, Abraham obeyed.

Throughout the years-long journey, God has blessed him by expanding his family, his wealth, and his influence in a foreign land. Then, God promised him that he would make Abraham the father of a great nation with descendants from his own offspring. He also

promised that his people would one day inherit the promised land. God even described the dimensions to him.

Additionally, we have seen God give Abraham and 318 men of his greater household victory over four armies led by powerful kings who had taken his nephew Lot and his household hostage.

And through it all we have seen Abraham extraordinary faith. And why was it extraordinary? Because the object of his faith was an extraordinary God. God is our shield and our very great reward.

Faith is also extraordinary because it is by faith in God's promise to give him a son that God now considers Abraham righteous. That is the pattern for us today also, that by faith in God's Son, Jesus Christ, we are made right with God.

And even in the midst of his questions and wondering how the Lord would fulfill his promise of a nation and land, God gave Abraham assurance through a covenant agreement with him. And, God by his presence alone, guaranteed the term of the covenant.

So, these are the highs. But, what about the lows? He is old and his wife is barren. All of these promises will go unfulfilled if they cannot have children. So, despite the great things God has done to make promises and assure his people, they are experiencing some incredible lows because God has yet to fulfill the most important promises that he has made to them.

As a result, they feel dejected. Their extraordinary faith is now in crisis. Have you ever been there? Have you had incredible lows in your faith? Have you ever experienced a faith crisis?

I believe God wants to help us today through his word to show us his heart for us whether we have been in one, will be in one, or are currently going through a faith crisis right now. Let's pick up where we left off last week in Genesis 16:

Genesis 16:1 Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. But she had an Egyptian slave named Hagar;

2 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." Abram agreed to what Sarai said.

3 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.

4 He slept with Hagar, and she conceived. When she knew she was pregnant, she began to despise her mistress.

5 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.”

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

7 The angel of the Lord found Hagar near a spring in the desert; it was the spring that is beside the road to Shur.

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.

9 Then the angel of the Lord told her, “Go back to your mistress and submit to her.” 10 The angel added, “I will increase your descendants so much that they will be too numerous to count.”

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.

12 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.”

13 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.” 14 That is why the well was called Beer Lahai Roi; it is still there, between Kadesh and Bered.

15 So Hagar bore Abram a son, and Abram gave the name Ishmael to the son she had borne. 16 Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore him Ishmael.

I love that God didn’t leave these stories out of the Bible. It’s not all polished up and glamorous. Even the absolute mess that this story is, it just adds to the validity of the trustworthiness of the Bible for me.

And what we have just read is a common pattern for the development of a faith crisis. So, as we walk through the story again we see that the development of a faith crisis begins with doubt, which often comes as a result of unmet expectations.

I. Development of a Faith Crisis

A. Doubt - Unmet Expectations (v. 1)

God promised to give Abraham descendants (a people) as numerous as the stars. God planned to give his promise to Abraham through his own offspring, not through adoption (as in the case of Eliezer; Gen. 15:3).

This has obviously been Sarai's understanding as well, that the promise would come through her husband's own offspring, yet in her waiting she is experiencing unmet expectations.

We all have experience in unmet expectations. Our expectations of others is often based on two factors: 1) How much they have done for me (i.e. A child expects more continuous provision from a providing parent); 2) How much I have done for them (i.e. a generous friend often expects a level of generosity in return)

Abram wasn't the only one who left his homeland. Sarai accompanied him. Along the way they have experienced the protection and provision of God, but they have also sacrificed so much in return.

So, her previous experience with God as a provider coupled with all that she has done by faith in following him, has resulted in a high expectation which God has yet to meet because he hasn't fulfilled His promise.

B. Despair - Unending Frustrations (v. 2a)

The unmet expectation caused unending frustrations for Sarai. In the ancient world, infertility had the potential to be problematic socially. Depending on the husband and situation, her barrenness could have been a justifiable reason for divorce. Additionally, people around her would have considered her cursed by God.

People would question her character and wonder what she could have possibly done that would cause God's hand of punishment to be on her. From the text, it appears that the main reason for her frustrations is her belief that God is punishing her. She said, "The Lord has kept me from having children."

C. Deviation - Ungodly Considerations (v. 2b)

Despair, frustration, then leads to deviation - the devising of ungodly considerations (alternative plans) according to cultural norms. Polygomy was culturally acceptable, but it is not God's plan for marriage. Up until this point, Abraham was a monogamist. He was living within God's original design for marriage - a union between one man and one woman for a lifetime.

But, Sarai in her frustration began to devise an ungodly plan. Now, don't be mistaken. It is not that she didn't have faith in God's promise. To the contrary, she believed so fully in God's promise to give her husband a son from his own offspring, that she was willing to sacrifice their monogamy for it to be fulfilled.

But, what she proposed was the world's solution. This is the point where she is taking matters into her own hands. Her convictions began to erode the moment she started embracing the idea of culturally acceptable alternatives. And, the acceptance of this worldly way began to crowd out the unique promises of their extraordinary God.

It's been ten years now since God first met Abraham and gave him his promise, and Sarai's patience has worn off. Her doubts have turned into despair, and in her despair she begins to deviate from God's plan.

D. Disobedience - Unnecessary Transgressions (vv. 3-6)

And now her deviation leads to disobedience - unnecessary transgressions. She didn't have to do this, but she was taking matters into her own hands. She proposed the idea to Abram to give him her servant Hagar.

And Abraham complied. Doesn't this resemble the story of the fall in the garden? Eve makes her proposition to Adam and he complies. They sinned. They transgressed against God.

They didn't have to. It was unnecessary. They had everything they needed in their relationship with God. But they were deceived. They were deceived into thinking that God's plan was insufficient for them.

Just a chapter ago, God reminded Abraham that he is his very great reward. He didn't need anything else because his greatest reward was God himself. Yet, they are

deceived as their focus is solely on the gift that was promised. They lost sight of the Giver and believed his plan was insufficient for them.

Then this unnecessary transgression takes root and begins a process that is all too common when we sin. It has a snowball effect. Unnecessary sin turns into unrepentant sin. Instead of turning from sin to God, we turn to more sin in response to our initial sin.

All three of these characters take part in this unrepentant sin. Sarah starts to blame others. She blames Abraham. In verse 5, she says, "You are responsible for the wrong I'm suffering." She then blames Hagar. "And Now SHE despises me." Sarai looks upon her in a condescending way. "How dare she? The nerve of my servant to think of herself as better than me."

Then Abraham, as a result of his disobedience, he doesn't take responsibility. "Your slave is in your hands. Do with her whatever you think is best." So Sarai then builds upon the sin from blaming her to mistreating her.

There is also Hagar's response to disobedience. She began to think of herself as better than Sarai. Despising Sarai in her heart, she says, "God finally gave me what she has been waiting for." "You have nothing over me now." And then in her response to Sarai's treatment of her, she runs.

This is what happens to us when we are disobedient. We sin unnecessarily and it often leads to unrepentant sin. We respond to sin with sin. We don't take responsibility. We blame others. And we run.

E. Damage - Unseen Ramifications (vv. 7-12)

All of this then leads to damage - unseen ramifications. God made a promise to give Hagar a son that she was to name Ishmael. God promised her (and Abraham later) that he would bless Ishmael as the father of a great nation as well. However, it is Isaac who would inherit the covenant, not Ishmael.

Instead, Ishmael becomes the father of the Arab nations. It is prophesied of him that he will be a wild donkey of a man. He will be hostile to everyone and everyone's hand will be against him.

So, he is the picture of a future antagonist without restraint. Just one example of how his descendants ended up being an antagonist in God's covenant story involves

Joseph. Just three generations later, in Genesis, 37, Joseph was sold into slavery by a group Ishmaelites.

Even today, 4000 years later, the Arab nations live in defiance to Israel. But, we can trace the damage back to this faith crisis in Genesis 16.

None of them could not foresee the damage their faith crisis would cause, and isn't that the case with us, when the development of a faith crisis ends in our disobedience. It has the potential to cause unseen ramifications that have a long lasting impact.

Since our text talks about a faith crisis caused by a sexual relationship outside of God's design, I just want to give you some examples of how God's design is distorted today and how we can struggle through a faith crisis as a result.

You see, God designed sex and he gave it as a means for procreation and a gift for enjoyment and intimacy within a marriage relationship between one man and one woman for a lifetime.

This is his plan, and he blesses it when it stays within that boundary. But we need to hear this as people: His gift was never supposed to be treasured over him, or pursued outside of his design.

So, the development of a faith crisis begins with doubt. "I expected God to give me someone by now." Or, "I have someone, but our passions for each other are too strong to resist, so maybe it's normal for things to progress." Or, "I seem to have attractions that wouldn't line up with a Biblical relationship, but maybe that isn't God's plan after all."

Then those doubts turn into despair - unending frustrations. "I guess God is never going to give me someone." Or "There is no way I can wait until marriage." Or "Did God make me this way? Nobody understands what I am going through."

Then despair turns to deviation - ungodly considerations. "I guess I'll just turn to the internet in the meantime." Or "Maybe I'll ask her if she wants to stay the night." Or "I think I'm going to tell someone of the same sex that there is an attraction."

Then deviation turns into disobedience - unnecessary transgressions that have the potential to build and snowball. "I can't stop watching it." "Let's just go ahead and move in together." "How am I going to tell my family?"

And then the damage happens. There is obviously near term damage that is done, but there are the unseen ramifications in your relationship with God and others: the lack of his light in your life. The distance. The lack of peace.

This is just one area of life, but you can insert anything into this pattern and watch a faith crisis develop. Another example: we know the truth that promises to be our provider. But we doubt it because we don't have the money right now. Then the despair ensues. Then we deviate from trust in God to scheme to not pay taxes. The list can go on and on.

But, there are also the more subtle self-righteous ways the crisis of faith can happen. God promises his authority will be imparted unto us and that he will be with us to the end of the age as we go and make disciples of all nations. But, how quickly do we shy away from his authority or doubt his presence, and instead rely on our own strength and strategies to get his work done.

When those fail we end up in a faith crisis. I guess I'll just quit the work that I thought God wanted me to do. But, here is the beauty of this story today. Whatever stage that we find ourselves in the development of a faith crisis, God's heart is to deliver us. There is deliverance from a faith crisis.

II. Deliverance from a Faith Crisis (vv. 13-16)

Hagar ran away to the desert and The angel of the Lord met her there near a spring. Now, some believe that the angel was simply an angelic messenger of God, but the traditional interpretation, from the earliest church fathers and throughout much of church history, is that the angel is what is called a Christophany, a preincarnate angelic vision of Christ himself.

There are a couple of reasons for this. First, the definite article "the" is given for the angel. "The Angel" of the Lord is how he is introduced. No where else in the new testament is an angel introduced into the story as "The Angel of the Lord." Secondly, the angel speaks to her in the first person. He tells her, "I will increase your descendants."

Furthermore, Hagar responds by giving the angel a name: You're "the God who sees me...for I have now seen the One who sees me." Then she named the well after him. Beer Lahai Roi which means "well of the Living One who sees me."

But, in either case, whether the angel is a messenger or if he is a preincarnate vision of Christ himself, the impact he made on Hagar was significant for two reasons. First, he

sees everything about her. He knows everything about her and he still comes after her. This shows us that Jesus cares for the outcast, those who would probably would only be able to give you testimony of "lows" at the dinner table.

Doesn't this cause you to think of a New Testament encounter that Jesus had at another well? He meets the Samaritan woman at the well. Jesus saw her as she was - a sinner in the depths of a faith crisis. He informed her that he was the messiah and offered her living water that flows from the well of his grace.

He promised her if she drank the water that he gave that she would never thirst again. And what is her response? She ran back to her town and told the people, "Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did." Some 2000 years prior, Hagar had the same response, "You are the God who sees me." Jesus sees the least of these. He comes to the broken.

The second reason his impact is so significant is when he tells her to return and submit to Sarai. This is important because he knows that her most abundant blessings and future provision will be found in the shade of the covenant given to Abraham rather than the scorching heat of the desert.

Isn't it wonderful to know that the covenant God gave to Abraham was just the beginning of the abundant blessings that God offers in his New Covenant in Christ. There are those of you here today who are wandering in a desert of sin, completely separated from God, but in the distance, there is the well of the Living One who sees you.

He sees everything about you, yet he still lovingly offers Living Water to you. He promises that you believe in him for salvation, then you will drink of the living water that flows from his Spirit. Spiritually, you will never thirst again.

Then, there are believers here today who have already encountered Christ at the well. You have tasted his Living Water and experienced his goodness. Initially, you ran to your hometown and told everyone of the God who sees you, but at some point you started to doubt the plans of God, and spiraled into a crisis of faith.

The God who sees you today is telling you to return to the shade of protection, freedom, and abundant life that God provides in Christ's covenant for those who are believers in his name.

Some of us are not in a crisis of faith right now, and you just need to be reminded of the warning signs for how a faith crisis develops. Because here is the truth, we as believers are so much better off when we trust the promises and faithfulness of God on the front of a trial or temptation rather than having him coming to clean up the mess in the aftermath of a crisis of faith.

Paul writes of this very thing to Timothy, his son in the faith, in 1 Timothy 1:18-19.

1 Timothy 1:18 I am giving you this command in keeping with the prophecies once made about you, so that by recalling them you may fight the battle well,

19 holding on to faith and a good conscience, which some have rejected and so have suffered shipwreck with regard to the faith.

He is urging Timothy to battle himself, and to help others in the faith battle against false teachings, cultural norms, or any deviation from God's plan. Instead, he urges him to hold on to faith and a good conscience lest they suffer a shipwreck in their faith.

Every now and then I have some time to go fishing with my father-in-law. In the fall, there is a great fishing spot in the lake, and we have loaded up on lots of speckled trout there over the years. On the way to the spot, we have to travel through a canal that is in the middle of a big pond.

At first glance, you would think that you could just make a sharp turn and get there a little faster through the pond, but from day one he showed me that there are buoys that mark a path through the canal.

And if you go outside of the buoys, even though it looks like there is a promising alternative path, you will inevitably get stuck in the mud. If we were in a ship, we would be shipwrecked very quickly.

This is how it is for the believer in Christ who has a crisis of faith. On your journey to where God wants you to be, you sometimes don't trust the path he has marked out for you. Because of doubt and despair you start moving closer to those buoys. Then you move right on top of the buoys when you start deviating by thinking about ungodly considerations.

Then, with a few choices, you are living in sin and disobedience. You are now charting your own course. You've loosened your grip on your faith in God's promises, and you are now stuck in the mud with a dirty conscience.

Yet, God sees you. He knows exactly where you are. It is his heart for you that by faith you will return to the path he has marked for you. Repent of the ways in which you have been living your life like it all depends on you. Return to your trust in the God who made a way for you to have a covenant relationship with him through Christ.

Send out an emergency cry for help today. In humility, tell the Lord that you desire to be back on his path. The God who sees you will deliver you and pull your shipwrecked vessel back to the safety of his path.

It may take a while to get up to speed again and to feel the wind of his Spirit with you. But, through one step of faith and obedience at a time, you will start moving again in his grace.