



Lesson 7 | God's Grace in Our Self-Made Disasters

Genesis 16:1-16

We have a way of creating really big messes. Often choices that make perfect sense to us end up leading to disaster. Proverbs puts it this: "There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, But the end thereof are the ways of death" (Proverbs 12:28). Too often people make decisions which seem practical, well-intentioned, and downright wise but are actually selfish, foolish, and ultimately harmful. This is a story that we will see played out in the story of Abram this week, but it is also one that has played out time and again in Scripture. If we are going to be honest, it's a story that has likely played out in our lives more than we would care to admit.

Why do ideas that are so bad often look so good to us in the moment?

How can we avoid making foolish decisions that seem like a really good idea to us?

Fortunately, we serve a God who specializes in bringing beauty out of ashes. He graciously comes to us in our self-made disasters, seeing our miserable condition and listening to our cries for help. Even when we start down the path that seems right but leads to disaster, God is willing to come and pull us out of the mess we have made for ourselves. In this lesson, we will watch in horror as Abram, Sarai, and Hagar follow a path that seems right to them, but which quickly unravels into an all-out disaster. We will start by watching how everyone participated to make this disaster happen, but then we will spend the rest of the lesson watching God step into this bleak situation with His grace.

The Disaster (16:1-6)

There are no heroes in this opening account. Every one of the main characters – Abram, Sarai, and Hagar – behaves selfishly or sinfully on some level. As in the account of Abram going down to Egypt, we have another instance where God never shows up and instead the characters are left to their own wisdom and scheming, and once again we have a disaster. Partway through this account, we are told that Abram and his family have been living in Canaan for 10 years (16:3), and after 10 years in the land the seed promised to Abram still not come. And so the scheming begins, and as the scheming begins, foolish decisions are made that create a mess for everyone.

Sarai's Fault – Worldly Wisdom

Obviously, the person most immediately responsible for this disaster is Sarai. She comes up with the whole plan in the first place, going to Abram and suggesting that he have a child with Hagar. While to us this seems unthinkable, it was a tradition that we see pop up elsewhere during this period of history. When a wife was unable to have a child for their wealthy husband, she would sometimes offer her slave who would serve as a “surrogate” of sorts and who would have a child that would be considered the child of the wife. Technically, this fulfills what God said in Genesis 15 – that Abram would have a child from his own body. Nothing in that passage said specifically that that Sarai would be the mother (that is coming later). And, as was mentioned, it's been 10 years since God promised a seed for Abram and the couple is no closer to a child. So Sarai, feeling the pressure to provide a son for her husband, comes up with a solution that would have made sense to everyone around her.

What are some ways in which we can follow the solutions of the world rather than trust in God's timing?

As we will see, Sarai realizes too late that this is a bad idea. When things don't work out the way she wants them to, she goes to her husband and blames him (“my wrong be upon you”). She then torments her slave and makes her life absolutely miserable. Rather than recognizing that the situation she finds herself in is one that she is primarily responsible for, she blames Abram and Hagar.

Can you think of other examples in Scripture where people blame others rather than accept responsibility for their actions?

Why do we tend to blame others for our own sinful choices?

Hagar's Part – Proud Conflict

Some might read this account quickly and rush to the conclusion that Hagar is the total and complete victim here who has done nothing wrong. After all, isn't she just a pawn being thrown around by Abram and Sarai in their impatience to let God work in His way and in His time? But there is a key phrase that lets us know there was more going on, that Hagar helped make this problem worse. We read that once Hagar was pregnant “her mistress was despised in her sight” (Genesis 16:4). The Bible teaches that it is only through pride that conflict comes (Proverbs 13:10), and here we see the pride of Hagar cause problems in the family.

We don't get any more details about what this would have looked like, but it's not too hard to imagine. Hagar, who was once a slave, is now a concubine of Abram (cf Genesis 16:3), and the concubine who is about to give him the child who will be his heir. Because of this, Hagar stopped seeing herself as Sarai's servant and started seeing herself as an equal. This kind of thing apparently was not entirely unheard of, as Proverbs 30:21-23 mentions this very situation when it states for a servant to produce an heir instead of her mistress cause the earth to tremble. Hagar's newfound position went to her head, it would seem, and in the end created even greater problems for herself and for others.

In what other ways can our pride get us in a mess?

Abram's Part – Passive Leadership

Notice the way Moses describes this whole situation unfolding. First, Abram listened (KJV hearkened) to the voice of his wife (16:2). Next we see that Sarai took her slave and gave her to her husband (16:3). If you have been reading the book of Genesis carefully, this should remind you of another husband who listened to his wife when she took and gave him something, because all these words are used in Genesis 3 to describe the fall of man (Genesis 3:6, 17). Much like Adam, Abram plays the part of the passive husband who lets his wife do wrong because he doesn't have the conviction to lead in a godly way. No doubt Abram felt for his wife who was discouraged she couldn't produce and heir, and no doubt he longed to see an heir. But because of that Abram followed the foolish counsel of his wife here rather than leading from a position of faith. This does not mean that a wife cannot or should not provide wise counsel to her husband, but in this instance Abram was passively following unwise counsel instead of leading.

We all tend to be people pleasers. How do we balance listening to godly counsel while not falling prey to being pleasers of men?

For husbands: How should you go balance respecting your wife's counsel and leading your family well when you disagree with her based on biblical conviction?

For wives: How can you respond rightly if your husband decides not to follow your advice?

But Abram has contributed to this problem in other ways as well. Abram has already allowed his wife to be taken into the home of another man (Genesis 12:15). This sinful action set the pattern in the family that preservation came above the marriage. Furthermore, the fact that Hagar is an Egyptian strongly suggests that she was one of the gifts Pharaoh gave as a result of taking Sarai into the palace (cf Genesis 12:16). It might have looked like Abram got away with running to Egypt and giving up his wife, since it all worked out in the end and he even built wealth through it all. But the seeds that he sowed back then are being reaped now in this tragedy. God's principle that you reap what you sow is true even for Abram, and it's true for you and me as well.

What are some of the ways in which our sins can have a bigger impact than we expect further down the road?

God's Grace (16:7-16)

The end of verse 6 gives us a bleak situation. Hagar flees from Sarai because the abuse is just too much. Remembering where Abram is journeying – in the hot, arid land of Canaan – suggests that this might end badly for Hagar. Yet it is when a pregnant, run-away slave in the hot desert finds herself in a hopeless situation that God shows up and in His mercy and kindness works in this situation for her good.

God Finds Hagar (16:7-8)

This section opens with the incredible statement that the angel of the Lord found Hagar. She is at a well on the way to Shur, which seems to be an area in the general direction of Egypt. What is interesting about this story is the amount of time and concern the text gives to Hagar since she is a foreigner, a woman, and

one who will end up giving birth to one of Isaac's rivals. And yet, the biblical story pauses and focuses in on this woman to show us God's heart and compassion for her. The biblical story could have skipped right over Hagar. After all, how noteworthy is it that a slave ran away and a few days/weeks/months later came back? But it was noteworthy to God, who wanted this story included.

Why do you think God wanted this story in the Bible?

What comfort can we take from the fact that this account is included?

God Encourages Hagar (16:9-12)

The message the angel brings to Hagar is a message with instruction and hope. It begins with the angel telling Hagar to go back and submit to Sarai. There is an interesting wordplay going on here. In Genesis 16:6 we read that Sarai "dealt hardly" with Hagar. This word (Hebrew *'anah*) could also be translated as oppress or humble someone. Yet the word can also mean to humble yourself, i.e., be humble. In verse 9 the same word is used when the angel tells Hagar to go back to Sarai and "humble" herself. In other words, God is telling Hagar to go back and take the path of humility by listening to Sarai rather than acting like Sarai's equal.

Why do you think God wants Hagar to go back and be humble?

How might this advice be different from the advice of the world today?

Where else in Scripture do we see that humility comes before blessing?

But God doesn't just tell Hagar to go back and leave it at that. He gives her an incredible promise – that she will have many descendants – and He lets her know that He has heard her. God gives Hagar a difficult command, but He wraps that command in His loving promises and assurances of His concern for Hagar. He tells her that she will have a son, and then gives a prediction about the type of life he would live. To a lonely, pregnant woman wandering through the desert, this message would have been exactly the encouragement she needed.

Do you have any personal examples of a time when God encouraged you in a bleak situation?

Hagar Praises God (16:13-14)

Hagar's response is fitting – she praises God for seeing and hearing her. She gives one of the most powerful names for God in the Bible – "El Roi" – the God who sees. Looking back on everything that has happened to her, Hagar can't believe that God would be so kind as to look down upon her. The thing that stands out most is not so much what God said or the instructions He gave, but the mere fact that He saw her in her misery. The name of Ishmael is a similar testimony to God – as the name Ishmael means "God hears." God sees Hagar and God hears Hagar: this is the humbling truth this Egyptian slave walked away with. It is a wonderful thought that in our affliction, even in our own self-made disasters, God sees us, finds us, and gives us what we need. When He does, the only natural response for us should be to turn in praise to Him.

What are some other ways we can show our gratitude to God in praise in our lives today?

The story we have looked at today ends with Hagar giving birth to a son for Abram when he is 86 years old. At long last, Abram has a son, but this does not answer the question of whether this is the son of promise. Apparently, Abram thinks that Ishamel is the son of promise based on what we read in the next chapter of Genesis. But while Abram might think Ishmael is that son, God has other plans. Abram has come a long way, but God is not yet done working on the faith of this patriarch.