

Genesis 16

This chapter tells the story of Hagar and Ishmael.

In chapter 15, God had promised Abram that he would have many descendants, but Sarai is still not pregnant. So, she instigates a plan that Hagar, her handmaid and slave, should sleep with Abraham to produce a child.

Sarai's Plan.

Sarai considers that it must be God who has prevented her from having children. In those days, it was an accepted view when no pregnancy occurred. But is it in fact true? Certainly, children are a blessing from God, but it is not necessarily a curse if a couple are childless. Sarai believed the promise that God would give them children, but when they were not forthcoming, she felt that somehow, it was her responsibility to make it happen.

Go Sleep with My Slave.

The Bible clearly teaches that sexual intimacy is confined to husband and wife. The narrative gives the impression that there was no love between Abram and Hagar and possibly no lust either, it was just a way to produce a child. But it was not God's way. Sarai gave Hagar to Abram as a second wife, she but had no right to do this. Marriage is not just about sexual intimacy, it is a lifelong relationship of mutual love, honour and respect; a commitment made before God and honoured by Him.

Hagar Conceives.

Once she has conceived, Hagar's reaction to Sarai is to despise her. We are not told exactly why but it becomes clear that the animosity between the women is great. It is strange that resentment and bitterness grow, Sarai having given her husband another wife so he can have children. Perhaps Sarai had not anticipated this reaction from Hagar. It maybe that Abram's ability to get Hagar pregnant made it clear that the failure to conceive had been Sarai's problem. Perhaps Hagar is sorry for Abram. However, her pregnancy has created a big relational problem between Sarai, Hagar and Abram; So, Abram puts the matter into Sarai's hands for her to deal with.

Hagar Flees from Sarai, now she is pregnant, feeling unable to stay; but the angel of the Lord meets her.

The Angel of the Lord

Hagar is instructed to go back and submit to Sarai. He promises that her descendants will be too many to count.

Her child will be called Ishmael (which means the Lord hears). He will be hostile to all his brothers and he will be very strong. Hagar has a relationship with God knowing that He sees her and will protect her as she gives birth to Ishmael. God has watched over all these events.

We can guess there had been tension between Abraham and Sarai leading up to the offer of Hagar as a second wife. Tensions from time to time are present in any marriage but we must learn to handle them in a godly way. Abraham is undoubtedly frustrated that Sarai is not conceiving and perhaps Sarai is feeling guilty about this; but the story is very much about what happens when trust in God is replaced by human effort.

Ishmael is born when Abram is 86 years old.

The outcome is very great. It is not just a matter of a child being born but another nation is to come out of this. God is sovereign but we must always seek to obey God's will and see his best plan emerge.

Points to consider.

Frustration can lead to sin. What could Sarai have done differently?

Why should Abram have refused Sarai's offer?

Why do you think Hagar despised Sarai?

How does God respond to Hagar?

Sin brings consequences. What are the consequences of Ishmael's birth and what do we know about his character?

What lessons do we learn from this story?