

# THE JOURNEY FROM BARRENNESS TO HOPE

## Part VI – Let God Show the Way

“Take your eyes off yourself” was a phrase not commonly followed by Asian-Americans living in southern California in the 1980s. Yes, I am talking about myself. Believe it or not, I was so into myself growing up in high school. And the best way to show yourself off to others was by how you look. Let me briefly share with you my experience in the fashion world during that time.

Never in my wildest dreams did I witness so many guys using as much hair spray as we did in high school. Hairstyle was determined by how slick your hair looked and how high your hair was. Having a tail in the back of your head was trendy. Wearing shoes without socks was the coolest thing (of course we took that advice from the TV show *Miami Vice*). And can you believe that kung-fu shoes were popular during that time? Unbelievable! The old-fashioned style of Nike, Adidas, and K-Swiss shoes famous today were the styles of the 80s. Did you know that baggy pants were admired in the 80s too? The only difference between today’s fashion and back then was that we would roll up the bottom of our pants instead of letting it loose over our shoes. Surf t-shirts (such as Maui and Sons, and Town and Country) and button-down long-sleeved shirts were all the rage; of course, they had to be untucked. And here is the kicker: I learned how to iron clothes during my high school years so that my clothes would look good in front of the girls.

In a deeper sense the phrase “take your eyes off yourself,” is not prevalent in our lives today either. This is true because we live in a society that favors the individual person and personal freedom. We love to be in control over our own destinies. When trials come our way we tend to find approaches that will protect our private interests first before worrying about other peoples’ fate. We think that we are the most important person in the whole world, and that all decisions must be made for our benefit. If anybody else gets hurt in the process, we just shrug it off and say, “That is just too bad.”

Here in Genesis 16 Abram’s journey out of barrenness into hope crashes into this unfortunate reality. Here we have a narrative where personal choice supplants the authority of God. At this juncture of Abram’s voyage we encounter the conflict between human control over against divine control. And yet in the midst of this disorder we see the intervention of God showing the way for those who are banished and alone.

Text: Genesis 16:1-16 (NLT)

<sup>1</sup>But Sarai, Abram's wife, had no children. So Sarai took her servant, an Egyptian woman named Hagar, <sup>2</sup>and gave her to Abram so she could bear his children. "The LORD has kept me from having any children," Sarai said to Abram. "Go and sleep with my servant. Perhaps I can have children through her." And Abram agreed. <sup>3</sup>So Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian servant and gave her to Abram as a wife. (This happened ten years after Abram first arrived in the land of Canaan.)

<sup>4</sup>So Abram slept with Hagar, and she became pregnant. When Hagar knew she was pregnant, she began to treat her mistress Sarai with contempt. <sup>5</sup>Then Sarai said to Abram, "It's all your fault! Now this servant of mine is pregnant, and she despises me, though I myself gave her the privilege of sleeping with you. The LORD will make you pay for doing this to me!"

<sup>6</sup>Abram replied, "Since she is your servant, you may deal with her as you see fit." So Sarai treated her harshly, and Hagar ran away.

<sup>7</sup>The angel of the LORD found Hagar beside a desert spring along the road to Shur. <sup>8</sup>The angel said to her, "Hagar, Sarai's servant, where have you come from, and where are you going?"

"I am running away from my mistress," she replied.

<sup>9</sup>Then the angel of the LORD said, "Return to your mistress and submit to her authority." <sup>10</sup>The angel added, "I will give you more descendants than you can count." <sup>11</sup>And the angel also said, "You are now pregnant and will give birth to a son. You are to name him Ishmael, for the LORD has heard about your misery. <sup>12</sup>This son of yours will be a wild one--free and untamed as a wild donkey! He will be against everyone, and everyone will be against him. Yes, he will live at odds with the rest of his brothers."

<sup>13</sup>Thereafter, Hagar referred to the LORD, who had spoken to her, as "the God who sees me," for she said, "I have seen the One who sees me!" <sup>14</sup>Later that well was named Beer-lahairoi, and it can still be found between Kadesh and Bered.

<sup>15</sup>So Hagar gave Abram a son, and Abram named him Ishmael. <sup>16</sup>Abram was eighty-six years old at that time.

We have seen in Abram's journey that despite God's promise of offspring and land for him, the circumstances still remained the same: Abram and Sarai were without children. (v. 1) How frustrating this must have been for them. No matter how encouraging God's word was to them, it seemed like the fulfillment kept tarrying. Will this promise ever come to fruition? How long must they persist before they give up on the promise? Is this even an option for them?

Here is a story that pits human control against the power of God. When things do not go our way, or even the way we think God's promises should unfold, we begin to question God's ability in leading us and accomplishing what he promised to do. There are at least five highlights in this passage:

1. When we are in control, **we push God away from our lives and circumstances.** (vv. 1-3)

So far, in Abram's journey towards hope, we have seen God initiate closeness towards Abram. God instigated relationship with his chosen servant to show Abram what divine love was all about. And when Abram found himself in difficult predicaments God always rescued him and his family from harm.

We assume that because God always had Abram's welfare in his heart, Abram would stick tightly to God, follow all of God's commands, and allow God to show the way for him and his family. But, Abram failed to do so in this narrative. Abram and Sarai focused so much on their circumstance (having no child of their own) that instead of seeking the plans of the LORD, they chose to follow their own thoughts on the matter. Their brilliant strategy was to bear a child through Abram and Hagar, Sarai's servant, even though God made it very clear to Abram that he and Sarai will have their own offspring. (see Genesis 15:4) Their control over the situation was so intense they pushed God out of the picture altogether. God's perfect plan for Abram's life was about to be ruined because Abram and Sarai failed to trust in him completely.

It is so easy for us to identify with Abram and Sarai here, isn't it? In fact, this is a very common way we snatch control from God. Even though God lays out a perfect purpose for each of our lives, we have a selfish tendency to think that our plans are even better than his. We focus so much on the 'impossibility' (or so we think) of our circumstances that we fool ourselves to believe that God cannot take care of the current condition. So, what do we do instead? We come up with our own dazzling maneuvers to set things right, only to fall flat on our faces because our plans were not perfect at all. We become so blinded by the stress and heaviness of our situations that we fail to see how insane our plans were to remedy the problem. At the very moment we need God the most we choose instead to push him away, settling for our own defective ideas and actions.

This is what being in control over our lives looks like. When we choose our strength and wisdom, we are also choosing to shove God away from our lives. We do not care about his will, his insights, or his authority over us. We deceive ourselves to believe that God is too limited, unable to provide solutions to our problems. We deliberately turn the other way instead of seeking after the truth of the divine. And we run as far away from God as possible, only to suffer consequences much greater than we can handle. What else takes place when we opt for our own plans rather than allowing God to show us the way?

2. When we are in control, **we only promote hatred and misery against one another.** (vv. 4-8)

Nothing good came out of Abram and Sarai's decision. Relationships crumbled as a result of their disobedience to God. Hagar despised Sarai after learning that she was pregnant. Sarai had an arrogance in her tone of voice, believing she gave Hagar the privilege to sleep with Abram. Sarai blamed Abram for Hagar's contemptuous attitude, even though it was Sarai herself who concocted this idea in the first place. Abram, being the head over his household, failed to protect Hagar and her (and his) child, deferring the decision to Sarai. Sarai treated Hagar with scorn, forcing Hagar to run away from the family.

It is so easy for life to fall apart quickly because we fail to seek God's counsel for our circumstances. We make decisions that are flawed and imperfect. When that happens only cruel consequences result. We must seek God out because his plan is perfect and without sinful defect. If you want righteous results, let God be in control; let God show the way. Without his guidance, the choices we make will be filled with destruction and recklessness. What ensues when we surrender to God's leading?

3. When God is in control, he exemplifies hope **by looking for us and speaking to us.** (vv. 7-8)

The harshness that we encounter in the story might lead us to think that all is hopeless. But, that is not true as long as God intervenes with his merciful love. Hagar disengaged herself from Abram's household, signifying her life as one of aloneness, one of meaninglessness. Imagine the chances of survival for a woman who was a slave and who was pregnant and who ran away from her previous master. Hagar's odds did not look good. The world had shut her eyes in ignoring Hagar, identifying her as a hopeless cause.

But, God never ignored Hagar. God never viewed her life as worthless. In fact, God offered hope to Hagar by doing two incredible things – he went out to look for Hagar and then he spoke to her. To look (and find) and to speak are two behavioral actions that have power to change lives forever. Can you imagine how important it was for Hagar that God went out to look for her when those closest to her abandoned her? And by speaking to her God acknowledged her existence at a time when people overlooked her.

This is the very nature of who God is. When he is in control he makes all effort to lift us up when our circumstances pull us down. Even when our stories start off in disarray, God can reshape life and turn it into wonderful hope. And he reshapes by searching for us and telling us that we are valuable to him. He dialogues with us when nobody else cares to. He runs after us when we choose to run away. God's guidance is to lead us back to real hope. Our destinies do not end by the desert springs. God has something much more for us. He wants us to accept ourselves the way he accepts us, in embrace and trust. We are important to the Divine, no matter how insignificant we are by the world's standards. And God will reveal significance to us by reconnecting with us in relationship, through his speech to us and through his pursuit after us. We are precious in the eyes of the LORD.

4. When God is in control, even those who are discarded **will experience God's full-of-life blessings.** (vv. 9-16)

The love of God was very evident in how he dealt with Hagar. When life was utterly hopeless God promised Hagar remarkable blessings: a son and countless descendants. God revealed himself to Hagar as the one who *hears* and who *sees* her. By being in control God chooses to become intimately personal towards Hagar. Despair was not the existence God had intended for her; he wanted a prosperous life for her and he will accomplish this through his full-of-life blessings for her.

Many of us might believe that we have been discarded away by our families, our spouses, our friends, our children. Where once we developed our identities through our relationships with people we now find ourselves empty and all alone. We may have run away from our circumstances of brokenness, but we still ended up in a desert of hopelessness. Nobody cares about us; nobody wants us. We are prepared to exist in isolation; we are ready to become invisible.

But, God will never allow us to become invisible. He *sees* us always. He *hears* our cries all the time. He is there ready to pick us up from our desperation. God shows us the way that leads to a hopeful reality. This is his character. Whereas our self-centered decisions escort us down the road to dejection, God's guidance draws us to a promising existence.

Hence, let God speak. Let God hear. Let God make decisions for your life for he promises a life of worth and hope. Watch him bring his promises into fulfilled joy.

5. To experience hope we must persist in faith, even when it goes against human common sense.

Interestingly, part of God's fulfilled purpose for Hagar was for her to go back to Abram and Sarai and to submit to Sarai's authority. Here we come back to the original dilemma – what if we do not like God's plan for us? What if we do not accept God's designed will for us? Abram and Sarai could not wait patiently for God's promise to come true, so they decided to do things their way. Hagar may not have enjoyed hearing God telling her to go back to Sarai and submit herself to the one person who scorned her. Yet, Hagar obediently followed the LORD's commands. In faith she trusted in God to show her the way, and at the end of the story she gave birth to Ishmael, the son she needed in order to inherit the generations of descendants promised by God. The blessings for Hagar were coming to pass all because she persisted in faith.

To experience hope we must endure in faith, especially in those moments when God's plan does not make sense to us. There will be a myriad of life experiences where God's will goes against every human convention. But, instead of looking towards our own knowledge and capabilities, we must rely upon God's direction in faith. Obedience to his calling will guarantee blessings in our journey towards hope. Just like Hagar, we must submit fully to God and trust in all his decisions. Hope will be realized when we trust God and seek him out instead of depending solely on our imperfect judgments. Let God show us the way to hope.

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