

ACN
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Genesis 16-18
Detour and Promise
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There is a particular kind of frustration that comes when you know what God has promised, but you cannot see how on earth the promise is going to happen.

You have prayed. You have waited. You have tried to be faithful.
And yet the circumstances seem to be moving in the opposite direction.

Sometimes the difficulty is not that we have forgotten God's promise. The difficulty is that **we remember it very clearly—and we can't see how God is going to fulfil it!**

That is where we meet Abram and Sarai today. God has called Abram. God has promised him descendants. God has promised that through him all the families of the earth will be blessed. God has even entered into covenant to with him.

And then... nothing happens. No child. No heir. No fulfilment.

The promise is there. But the circumstances contradict it.

And eventually Sarai decides, and Abram follows along, that they need to help God out.
And **that** is the beginning of the detour.

Genesis 16–18 is a fascinating section of Abram's story because it takes us on a journey with these people. A journey from what was perceived as failure to being renewed in faith, from understandable **impatience** to trusting the **promise**, and from human **scheming** to God's **faithfulness**.

And it speaks very directly to Christian discipleship because most of us know something about detours, don't we?

When circumstances change unexpectedly.
When suffering suddenly comes.
When other people make decisions that adversely impact you.
And sometimes—being honest—the detour is totally our fault.

We make a decision that seemed reasonable; we take matters into our own hands; we stop trusting; we try to manufacture the future rather than waiting for God to give it.

BUT ... one of the great messages of these 3 chapters is:

Detours do not cancel God's covenant purposes.

But neither are our detours harmless. God is wonderfully gracious, but he also lovingly exposes what those detours reveal about our hearts.

So I want us to see three things today:

- Firstly, the **detour** — when we try to fulfil God's promise ourselves
- Secondly, the **covenant** — when God reminds us that the promise depends on him
- The **promise** — when God asks us to trust him with what seems impossible.

And running through all three chapters is one great truth:

God is faithful when we are faithless, and his promises rest on his character, not our ability to control the outcome.

1. THE DETOUR — WHEN WE TRY TO FULFIL GOD'S PROMISE OURSELVES

Let's begin with Genesis 16:1: Bible open, we'll be looking at passages we haven't had read this morning.

16:1 "Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children."

That sentence is devastating. Because we know what God has promised. Back in Genesis 12, God said: "I will make you into a great nation." and in Genesis 13: "I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth." And then in Genesis 15, God tells Abram that his very own son will be his heir.

The problem is — Sarai is still childless.
And by Genesis 16, the tension has become unbearable.

v.2: "Sarai said to Abram, 'The LORD has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my slave; perhaps I can build a family through her.' "

Notice something important.
Sarai isn't rejecting God. She actually uses the name of the LORD. She knows God's promise.

Her problem isn't that she doesn't believe in God. Her problem is that she has begun to believe that **God's promise needs her assistance.**

And that is one of the most subtle temptations of faith. We don't necessarily stop believing God. We simply decide that **God needs some help.**

I think this is like the terrible heresy, that people often quote as if it's a Bible verse (and I think some people even believe it is in the Bible) - God helps those who help themselves.

And so Sarai gives Hagar, her Egyptian servant, to Abram.

Now that was culturally acceptable in the ancient world. But something being culturally acceptable doesn't make it spiritually right.

Abram agrees. And Ishmael is conceived. And for a moment it appears as though the problem is solved.

But Genesis 16 is not a story about solving a problem.

It's a story about the consequences of **trying to achieve God's purposes through human manipulation.**

Look at v.4: "And when Hagar saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress."

The relationship collapses. Hagar has contempt. Sarai becomes bitter. Abraham becomes passive. And eventually Hagar runs away into the wilderness.

This is what happens when we try to force God's promise.

We often imagine that taking control will make life simpler. But our shortcuts frequently create problems we never anticipated.

Now, it's important that we handle this part of Genesis carefully. The Bible doesn't present Hagar as a villain. In fact it's quite the opposite. Hagar is vulnerable. She's a servant, caught in the consequences of decisions made by people with far more power than her. And when she runs away, God comes looking for her.

v.7: "The angel of the LORD found her by a spring of water in the wilderness."

What an extraordinary sentence.

The people who should have protected Hagar have failed her. But God sees her.

The angel asks: "Hagar, servant of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?"

And Hagar responds. Then God gives her a promise.

Her son will be called Ishmael, which means "God hears."

God has heard her affliction, and Hagar responds by giving God a name: "You are a God of seeing." El Roi. "The God who sees me."

What a beautiful moment.

And that matters pastorally. Because perhaps your detour has involved someone else hurting you, and you're living with consequences you didn't create.

Genesis 16 says: God sees you. He sees what others don't see, and hears what others don't hear.

But God's grace toward Hagar doesn't mean that Abram and Sarai's decision was wise. God can redeem our detours without endorsing them, and that's important to remember.

Sometimes we look back on our lives and say: "Well, it all worked out."

But the fact that God was gracious doesn't mean our decision was good. God's grace is often seen precisely in him bringing redemption out of our failures.

But what lies underneath ch 16?

Impatience. Abram and Sarai have received a promise, but they can't bear waiting. And waiting is one of the great tests of faith.

It's easy to trust God when the answer comes quickly. It's harder when God says: "Wait."

Waiting shows whether we trust **God himself**, or merely trust him to give us what we want. And that's a crucial distinction.

Sometimes we say: "I trust God" but what we really mean is: "I trust God as long as he does what I think he should do."

But biblical faith says: "I trust the God who has made the promise, even when I **cannot** see how or when he will fulfil it."

And that is what Abram and Sarai have not yet learned.

2. THE COVENANT — GOD REMINDS ABRAM THAT THE PROMISE DEPENDS ON HIM

After the disaster of ch 16, we come to ch 17. And the timing is striking. Genesis 16 ends with Abram being 86 and Genesis 17 begins when Abram is 99.

Thirteen years have passed. Thirteen years of silence. Another thirteen years of waiting.

And then: "When Abram was ninety-nine years old the LORD appeared to him and speaks again. And the first words are: "I am God Almighty; walk before me faithfully, and be blameless."

God doesn't begin by discussing Abram's strategy. He begins by reminding Abram **who he is**. "I am God Almighty."

That is where faith should always begin. Not with: "What can I do?" But: "Who is God?" Not: "How can I fix this?" But: "Can I trust the God who has spoken?"

God says: "No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations."

Abram means something like "exalted father." Abraham points toward "father of a multitude."

Imagine the absurdity. God changes his name to "Father of a multitude" when he doesn't even have the one promised son.

It's as if his name itself becomes an act of faith.

God is saying: Live now in the light of what I have promised, even before you can see the fulfilment.

That is biblical faith. Faith doesn't pretend the circumstances are different. Faith looks at the circumstances honestly and says: "Yes, this is impossible. But God has spoken."

Then God gives Abraham the sign of the covenant: circumcision. This is really interesting. It's an embodied sign. Abraham's relationship with God is not merely intellectual. His whole body belongs within the covenant. And there is a striking theological point here.

The sign of circumcision is connected to Abraham's reproductive organs. It's the very part of his body through which he had attempted to bring about the promise.

But it is **that**, that will be marked as belonging to God.

It's almost as though God is saying:

The promised future will not come through human engineering. It will come through my covenant faithfulness.

And then God says something Abraham finds astonishing.

v.16: "I will bless her, and will surely give you a son by her."

And Abraham's response is v.17: "Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed." Later Sarah will laugh too. There's a lot of laughter throughout Gen 17–18.

God isn't simply going to produce a child. He is going to produce the child **through Sarah**.

Abraham will be marked permanently with a covenant scar (so to speak) and it is only then that the promise, the covenant is fulfilled.

Abraham is circumcised at the age of 99. Ishmael also is circumcised at the age of 13, and all males in the household are also circumcised.

3. THE PROMISE — GOD DOES WHAT WE CANNOT DO

And then Genesis 18 brings sharp focus.

Abraham is sitting by the oaks of Mamre and three visitors arrive. Their introduced mysteriously, and one of them speaks with the authority of the LORD himself.

Abraham runs to meet them, welcomes them and provides food. And eventually the conversation turns to Sarah.

v.10: "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife shall have a son."

Sarah is listening at the tent entrance. And she laughs and thinks - "After I am worn out, and Abraham is old, will I now have this pleasure?"

That is questioned by the visitors (who are now described in the story as "the Lord") and he says — in v.14: "Is anything too hard for the LORD?"

There is the question of Genesis 16–18. **Is anything too hard for the LORD?**

It's not a question about whether God can do absolutely anything imaginable. It's a question about whether God's purposes can be frustrated by human limitations.

Sarah thinks: "I'm too old." God says: "Is anything too hard for me?"

Abraham thinks: "The circumstances make this impossible." God says: "Is anything too hard for me?"

What sort of things do we say?

"My family's too broken."

"That person will never change."

"I've wasted too much time."

"I've failed too badly."

"I'm too old."

"I'm too young."

"I've gone too far."

"I don't know how this can possibly work."

God asks: "Is anything too hard for the LORD?"

It would be easy to preach Genesis 16–18 and just say:

"Just trust God and everything will work out."

But Genesis is far more honest than that. The promise does not mean an easy life.

Abraham's life is still marked by uncertainty.

Hagar has suffered. Ishmael will have a complicated future. Abraham and Sarah have to wait. The covenant will eventually lead them into extraordinary demands.

And in the chapters that follow, Abraham will be tested in ways he could never have imagined.

The promise does not eliminate the cost of discipleship. The promise does not eliminate obedience.

But it does give meaning to it.

That is why the series is called: Call. Covenant. Cost.

God's call leads into covenant. And covenant leads into a life of trust and obedience.

4. THE GOD WHO SEES — AND THE GOD WHO COMES NEAR

There is another beautiful thread connecting these chapters.

Genesis 16: God sees Hagar.

Genesis 17: God speaks to Abraham.

Genesis 18: God comes to Abraham.

We do not have a distant God. He sees. He speaks. He comes near.

And that should profoundly shape our understanding of the Christian gospel.

Because the God of Genesis is ultimately revealed in Jesus, God comes near. The Word becomes flesh. God enters our wilderness. He enters our suffering. He sees us.

And in Christ, God does something even greater than giving Abraham a son. He gives his own Son.

And through Jesus, the promise to Abraham reaches its fulfilment.

Remember what God said to Abraham in Genesis 12:
"In you **all** the families of the earth shall be blessed."
How? Ultimately through Jesus.

Paul says in Galatians 3 that the promise given to Abraham reaches its fulfilment in Christ. And if you belong to Christ, you are caught up in that promise. You are part of the people of God. The blessing promised to the nations has reached us.

5. WHAT DO WE DO WITH OUR DETOURS?

So what does this all say to us?

Don't confuse delay with abandonment

One of the most difficult spiritual disciplines is learning that God's silence is not God's absence. Perhaps you are in a season of waiting. You've prayed and asked. And nothing seems to be happening. This is not proof of God's absence. God's timetable is most likely different to ours.

We can pray - "Lord, I don't understand your timing. But I know your character."

Be careful when impatience makes you manufacture outcomes

Genesis 16 asks us a searching question:

Where am I trying to make happen what God has asked me to trust him for?

There is a difference between faithful action and anxious control.

Faithful action says: "God has given me responsibilities, and I will faithfully do what he has called me to do."

Anxious control says: "If I don't make this happen, everything will fall apart."

Those two things can look remarkably similar on the outside. But they come from very different hearts.

Genesis 16 invites us to put down the steering wheel.

Not because our actions don't matter. They do.

We put down the steering wheel because we are not God.

Let God redefine your identity

God changes their names. Abram becomes Abraham. Sarai becomes Sarah. God gives them new names because the covenant gives them a new identity.

Now **that** is deeply significant for Christians.

The Christian life begins when we stop trying to create our identity and start living out the identity God gives us in Christ.

6. THE BIGGER PROMISE

— Trust the God of the detour

At the centre is the question:

"Is anything too hard for the LORD?"

Genesis 16–18 says: No.

God's grace is bigger than your detour.

The greatest promise God has ever made has already been fulfilled in Jesus.

God promised Abraham that through his offspring blessing would come to the nations.

And in Jesus Christ, that blessing has come.

At the cross, Jesus bears our sin.

In the resurrection, God declares that death itself cannot defeat his purposes.

And through faith in Christ, we become children of Abraham—not because we have lived perfectly, but because we trust the God who keeps his promises. Amen.