Genesis 16:1–16 — Sarai, Abram's Wife, Bare Him No Children

Hagar the Egyptian, The First Man and the Second Man, Sarah as Grace, Abram's Abdication, and the Galatians 4 Allegory

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Scripture Reading: Genesis 16:1–16; Galatians 3:23–25; 4:22–31

> *"And Sarai said unto Abram, Behold now, the LORD hath restrained me from bearing: I pray thee, go in unto my maid; it may be that I may obtain children by her. And Abram hearkened to the voice of Sarai."*
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> *"Cast out the bondwoman and her son: for the son of the bondwoman shall not be heir with the son of the freewoman." (Galatians 4:30)*

The First Man and the Second Man: The Pattern Behind the Chapter

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The history of the patriarchs in Genesis is not primarily a history of salvation unfolding — it is the history of two men, the first man and the second man: the setting aside of the first and the establishment of the second in his place. Our blessing flows from that. The consistent pattern throughout Genesis is that the firstborn does not carry the line of blessing. First that which is natural, afterward that which is spiritual (1 Corinthians 15:46). Ishmael comes first and is not the heir; Isaac is the son of promise. The four great patriarchs present distinct aspects: election in Abraham, sonship in Isaac, discipline in Jacob, and the sufferings and glory to follow in Joseph. Genesis 22 — the father and the son going up together, the only son whom thou lovest — shows what sonship in Isaac is pointing to. Ishmael is what nature produces in attempting to secure the promise; Isaac is what God gives by grace.

Hagar the Egyptian: The World Brought into the House

The very first verse identifies Hagar as an Egyptian. Egypt in Scripture is the symbol of organized human civilization — the world as a structured, impressive system: temples, idols, robed priests, government officials, armies. It is the world from which Abraham had been called. Under famine pressure he went down to Egypt, and that is where Hagar was acquired. Getting something from the world into the house is far easier than getting it back out. Hagar was in the house for fourteen more years before the weaning time came. Something from the world, once admitted into the household of faith, does not leave quickly or painlessly.

Sarai's Suggestion: The Same Pattern as Eden

In verse 2, Sarai sets the whole course of events in motion. It was not the first time in Scripture that a woman's suggestion led a man into sin. What happened in Eden — Eve gave Adam the fruit, Adam hearkened — has its echo here. Abram hearkened to the voice of Sarai, just as Adam hearkened to the voice of Eve. In both cases the man abdicated his responsibility to hold the line of God's word. The pattern is not a condemnation of women generally but a revelation of what happens when the order God established — man as head of his household, responsible before God for its direction — is abandoned.

What drove Sarai's suggestion? She had rightly perceived the Lord's hand: the LORD hath restrained me from bearing. That recognition was good. But the proper response to God's restraining hand is to wait on him, not find a way around it. The motive at the center of her suggestion was also imperfect: it may be that I may obtain children by her. Her desire was for herself. And as the story shows, she never had the joyful relationship with Ishmael that she was seeking; he was always Hagar's son. Getting the world's means does not produce the promised blessing. J.N. Darby, in old age, often wrote of his deep desire not to be a meddler — someone who is impatient at the rate at which God is working, who

wants to help the Lord along. That spirit is exactly what we see in Sarai here.

Abram's Abdication: Do to Her What Is Good in Thine Eyes

When Sarai brings her complaint to Abram in verse 6, his answer is a moral abdication: thy maid is in thy hand; do to her as it pleaseth thee — or in J.N. Darby's translation, do to her what is good in thine eyes. The flavor of those words is dismissal. You created this situation; you deal with it. This is not the headship God assigned to the husband. The right path would have been self-judgment: go back to the starting point — the LORD hath restrained me from bearing — and say together, we did not wait for him. Instead Sarai says, my wrong be upon thee, a half-admission that immediately becomes blame. And she invokes the Lord as judge between adversaries: let the Lord judge between me and thee. Those words speak of a total breakdown of what God intended in marriage. They shall be one flesh; now they are me and thee.

Hagar by the Fountain: Two Questions

The angel of the Lord found Hagar by the fountain in the wilderness on the way to Shur and asked her two questions: whence camest thou? and whither wilt thou go? She could answer the first but had no real answer to the second. Her only plan was flight — away from Sarai's face. Flight without a destination is not deliverance. The angel's command was to return to her mistress and submit. Submission runs through the whole chapter as the thing that was missing everywhere: Sarai should have submitted in patience to God's timing; Hagar despised her mistress instead of serving with singleness of heart; and now Hagar is called to submit and return. God saw her affliction — the well is called Beer-lahai-roi, the well of him that liveth and seeth me — and his seeing does not mean he was indifferent to her suffering, but his remedy was not flight but return.

The Galatians 4 Allegory: Two Women, Two Principles

Paul’s use of this history in Galatians 4 makes explicit what the types are pointing to. Hagar, the bondwoman from Egypt, represents Mount Sinai — the law, bondage, the principle of approach to God through man’s performance. Sarah, the free woman, represents the Jerusalem above — grace, promise, the principle of what God freely gives. These two principles cannot permanently coexist in the same house.

There was a time when Hagar was properly in the house. Under the Old Testament economy, law and grace coexisted: the tables of the law were in the ark and the mercy seat covered them. God’s electing grace worked in the midst of Israel throughout. The weaning time — the coming of Christ — was the moment when the principle changed entirely. Grace and truth came by Jesus Christ. Galatians 3:23–25 says precisely what kind of tutor the law was: not a tutor bringing us to Christ, as covenant theology has misread it, but a tutor up to Christ — exercising its function until the great change came with Christ. At that weaning time, Hagar left the house.

The fruit of taking up the world’s methods to secure God’s promise is always Ishmael: a wild man, hand against every man, every man’s hand against him. It goes back to Cain — who instead of returning to God built cities and introduced the worldly system. When worldly principles are mixed into what God is doing, the result is conflict and lawlessness. Christendom is full of this mixture: human methods employed to secure divine results, the world’s music harnessed to fill halls, the flesh made provision for. But the flesh produces flesh; the Spirit produces spirit.

For it is written, Cast out the bondwoman and her son: for the son of the bondwoman shall not be heir with the son of the freewoman. (Galatians 4:30)