

Genesis 16

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[0:00] Please do open up your Bibles to Genesis 16! Abraham falls, but the up, God makes a promise.

Evil fills the world, but God saves Noah. Abraham is called, but almost destroys the promise, but God rescues. As you follow God's people and his promise to save the world, it isn't this neat straight line journey with no hiccups.

No, it's actually a real mess. It's a rollercoaster of ups and downs. That's why all of our lives are never just this neat straight line.

But we also see in Genesis, the rollercoaster never collapses. It keeps going, because God's grace is always there to rescue and restore.

And this constant cycle of sin and grace, sin and grace, it's there throughout Genesis because it is showing us this is what life is like under God's promise.

[1:31] This is the reality of being God's people in Christ's church. It's not neat or perfect. It's messy. The Christian life is full of failures and sins and brokenness and even shattered families.

But there is something constant in our life that stops us from collapsing. It is the grace of God. The God who sees us and restores us and looks after us as we live under his promise.

And this chapter in front of us really captures the down and the up of the Christian life. This is a very unvarnished and honest account of the messy reality of God's people.

And so if you are here tonight and you are thinking that Christians are just these glossy people with picture perfect lives, I hope your assumptions will be dashed tonight. Because that is simply not the reality.

But I also hope you'll see there is something even more beautiful going on in a Christian's life. It is the grace of God who restores us.

[2:47] And so this chapter is a story of two hearts, sin and grace. Our mess and God's restoration. And this chapter is here to help us to understand the mess of our lives.

To understand how we wander, why we doubt, how we end up in those downs and to warn us of it. But this also shows us the God who restores.

Our saviour who helps the wandering and the broken and the destitute. And he sees all our affliction. So we're going to look at the two halves of this chapter.

The mess of sin and the grace when God sees us. But first we need to recognise, we need to understand the mess of sin. My first point today, the mess of sin. This chapter begins with a double problem.

Did you see, look at verse 1. Now Sarai, Abraham's wife, had borne him no children. So not only is Sarai suffering the painful grief of childlessness, an agonising experience for so many.

[3:59] But there is something even worse. The child she hopes for is meant to bring blessing to the world. That's the promise God made to Abraham.

Abraham's going to have a child, offspring. And from him will come a great nation. And through that offspring, God's blessing will reach the world.

God is going to save this world from the curse through someone coming from Abraham's family tree. It's the same promise of the gospel we have today.

Except we know who the offspring turns out to be. We can look back to see who Jesus is. See the fulfilment in him.

But Abraham and Sarai can't look back. No, they are looking ahead. Waiting for God to act. Waiting for God to do something.

[4:59] But they don't see anything. In fact, look at verse 3. It's been 10 years of nothing. Can you imagine how hard that is?

10 years of waiting. I'm sure we all know that feeling when life seems bleak. And God has made big promises for us. Promises to be with us.

And love us. But we just don't see it. We don't see God working in our lives. We don't see his promises coming true. We wait and we wait and we wait.

We don't see light at the end of the tunnel. And it can make us doubt God, can't it? We wonder, where are you, Lord, in all of this?

And when that happens, we can either, by faith, wait on the Lord. And even though we don't see him, we trust God that he is there and he is doing something in my life, even though I don't understand it.

[6:02] Or we can just become bitter and replace that faith with doubt. Well, look how Sarai responds, verse 3.

And Sarai said to Abraham, Behold now, the Lord has prevented me from bearing children. What's she doing? She doesn't see God working according to her timings and her ways.

And so she becomes bitter. And she doubts God's character. In fact, she blames God. The Lord has prevented me. God's done this.

God's set me up. God's against me right now. She thinks God is useless and can't and won't fulfill his promises. And so, because of that, she starts looking at everything in the wrong way.

Like lenses over our eyes. With the lens of faith, we may not see God at work right now, but we realize he is there.

[7:07] He is at work and his promises never fail. And so we see this problem in my life. I may not understand it, but I know it's there for a reason. But with the lens of doubt, we only see our problems as God is against me.

Or God is useless. Or God can't really help me in this cursed world. And so when we think like that, what do we try to do?

We try to fix it ourselves. If God won't make me happy, then I'll take my happiness into my own hands. Which is exactly what Sarai does, verse 2.

Behold now, the Lord has prevented me from bearing children. Go into my servant. It may be that I shall obtain children by her. If God won't bring this child, I will.

If God can't bless me, then I'll find the blessing myself. So she takes plans into her own hands. And she gets Abraham to sleep with her servant, Hagar. And did you notice?

[8:14] It's just like the Garden of Eden all over again. Like Eve, Sarai doubts God's character. Like Eve, Sarai tempts her husband with this plan.

And like Adam, Abraham listens to the voice of his wife instead of leading her. And like the fruits, look at verse 3. Sarai took Hagar and gave her to Abraham.

And like Adam and Eve, they try to find blessing without God. This same pattern of sin continues east of Eden. We see it with Abraham.

We see it with Sarai. And we see it in our own hearts today. When we don't see God working the way we want him to. And we're dissatisfied with what the Lord has given us in this life.

And we aren't happy in the way that we hoped. And maybe, maybe, like Sarai, it's the disappointment that God hasn't given me a family. And we don't see light at the end of the tunnel.

[9:21] And we can't see his plans. We don't like his timings. And the new creation isn't coming fast enough. And so what do we do? We doubt God. And we take things into our own hands.

Well, if God won't fix my dissatisfaction, well, I'll find satisfaction somewhere else. I'll find it in my work. Forget church.

Forget Sundays. Let's really do something with my career now. Or if it's not God's plan to give me a family, well, I'll make my own plans. And we get on the apps.

We start texting. We say yes to those coffee meetups with that guy at work, the guy at the gym. Or God isn't working fast enough with the pain in my life.

But drinking helps it instantly. So I'll take it into my own hands. This is what we do. God has promised to restore Eden, but I can't see it, so I'll make an Eden for myself.

[10:21] We may not realize it, but it is the attitude of, I can create blessing better than God can.

And in fact, in Galatians, in the New Testament, Paul looks back at this very moment with Sarai and Hagar, and he says, what is going on here is actually, at heart, this is Sarai trying to save herself.

Abraham can either have a saviour child through Sarai, relying on God's promise, and therefore salvation will come by God alone. By faith, God will be the one to fix the sin and mess of this world.

Or, Abraham and Sarai can have a child through Hagar, relying on what they do, their works, their plans, their efforts, and trying to fix sin themselves.

What we have here is salvation by faith versus salvation by works. And when we doubt God and try to fix our fallen life with what we do, whether it be building a happy life our way, or trying to cover up our guilt by living a better life, either way, ultimately, we are trying to save ourselves.

But it doesn't work. Because the only way out of this curse is for God to save. To trust in God's promise, faith.

[11 : 55] This is why Christ came. Not for you to dig yourself out of this hole, but for Christ to reach down and pick you up himself.

Not for you to work, but for Christ to work for you. And that is the choice set before us. With our sin, with our guilt, with whatever misery and pain we are going through, and we struggle to see God, or any light at the end of the tunnel, will you leave it in God's hands?

Or will you take it into your own hands? Well, this chapter warns us, when we do take it into our own hands, it only leaves us in a bigger mess.

Just look at the fallout of Sarai's plan. Verse 4. Hagar becomes pregnant, and Hagar looked with contempt on her mistress.

Hagar looked down on Sarai, mocks her. I got pregnant and you didn't, Sarai. And it sparks jealousy, a rivalry in the household.

[13 : 06] And verse 5. Sarai says to Abraham, this is all your fault. I gave her to you, and now look how she's treating me. It's all your fault, Abraham. Even though this was actually Sarai's plan.

But Abraham, he's stuck in the middle now. And so verse 6, he says, well, she's your servant, you deal with her. And so Sarai is harsh with Hagar.

Hagar makes her life a living nightmare. And so Hagar runs away. Away from Canaan, away from the promise, and away from God.

Broken family, broken marriage, runaway pregnancy, shattered faith. It is by any standard, an absolute mess.

This is a very, very low dip in the roller coaster. And how did it all start? With doubting God and taking things into our own hands.

[14 : 08] From that to now this mess. And this is showing us something very important that we need to know. Sin has real consequences.

Sin never just happens in a vacuum. No. Sin ripples out into this world and into our lives and causes real, tangible mess.

Our decisions to make an Eden for ourselves here on earth without God, it has consequences. It can shatter families. It can taint marriages.

It can cause rivalries, jealousy. jealousy. And like Hagar, it can even make people run away from God altogether. It is what we painfully see all around us and it's what we painfully see in our own lives.

And these consequences, they can even be long term. The big one here being there is now this child, Ishmael. and though every child is a wonderful gift from God, he will be a permanent reality in their lives now.

[15 : 25] And that family dynamic is going to be complicated. And in fact, this child is going to cause trouble for generations to come. Did you see that in verse 12?

His hand will be against everyone and everyone's hand against him. And he shall dwell over against all his kinsmen. This is anticipating the friction between the Ishmaelites and the Israelites. Now this isn't saying that every child brings complicated dynamics. No, it's not saying that. This chapter is teaching that sin can have short term and long term consequences.

It causes all sorts of mess. And what makes it even messier is that there aren't clear-cut goodies and baddies here.

It's not sinners or victims. It's both. Sarai sinned with this plan but she was also sinned against by Hagar.

[16 : 30] Abram was sinned against, tempted by Sarai, but he also sinned by listening to her. Hagar was used. She was treated harshly but she also sinned against Sarai.

She sparked this rivalry. So not only are the consequences messy but also the situations that start them.

And this is usually the case in the mess of our lives. We are very tempted to think we are only victims, never the sinner.

Now there are cases victims of that. Don't get me wrong, we don't want to ignore real victims of sin but we're so easily tempted to think we are only victims, never the sinner.

But most of the time it's messy, it's both. And it takes real humility to recognise that and to see where we have sinned and in all the mess of it, if we have been sinned against, are we responding sinfully.

[17 : 40] And this chapter, it's getting us to ask ourselves that. It is here to warn us of the mess, sinking cause when we doubt God and take things into our own hands. And let's not miss this.

This is all happening in the church. In this chapter, we aren't in the pagan nations. We aren't following the lives of unbelievers.

No, this is the very heart of God's people. At this point, the promise exists nowhere else in the world. It is only here in this family and what does it look like?

An absolute mess. And this shows us what life in the church can be like. It's a rollercoaster. If you are here thinking that Christians are just these glossy people with picture-perfect lives, that simply isn't the reality.

This side of heaven, life in the church is messy, full of complexities and difficult family dynamics and hurt and sin and all its consequences. And so there will be many here tonight who are going through that right now.

[18 : 55] You may be in that mess. You took things into your own hands and it's all gone wrong and it just seems unfixable. You don't know where to turn and you still don't see any light at the end of the tunnel.

Well if that is you and it's all of us really, then we need to see how God responds to all this mess. In his grace and in his gentleness, God sees us.

And this is the second and the final thing I want us to see tonight, the grace when God sees us, the grace when God sees us. At this point, we're really at the bottom of the roller coaster.

Hagar is pregnant and vulnerable and alone, abandoned, nowhere to turn, lost in the mess, literally lost in the wilderness right now, and now very far from God and his promises.

It's rock bottom. But then we hear these very beautiful words in verse 7. The angel of the Lord found her by a spring of water in the wilderness.

[20 : 11] A broken woman, nowhere to turn, a guilty woman whom the Lord didn't need to take notice of, but the Lord found her.

Just like the lost sheep, isn't it? And I think it's just such a lovely phrase that captures how God deals with us. He finds us when we're lost in the mess.

And when he does, he begins to untangle it by speaking. Do you see, God speaks the exact words she needs. He actually speaks the gospel here.

He first of all addresses her sin. He asks verse 8, where have you come from? And where are you going? He forces Hagar to reflect on her life, on her choices.

And then God calls her back. Return to your mistress and submit to her. Hagar, repent. Return to the people of God, come back to salvation.

[21 : 16] And then he promises to bless Hagar, verse 10. I will surely multiply your offspring so that they cannot be numbered for multitude. They're not easy words to hear, but they are such good words.

And it's what God says to everyone who doubts and wanders and has taken life into their own hands. In our mess, God says, repent. Return to my people, and I will bless you even more.

God brings her back. She returns to the promise to God's people. God begins even to repair the relationships.

She goes back to Sarai, but God never holds her sin against her. He doesn't bring it up. She doesn't have to make up for it.

She doesn't miss out on any blessing. God is just so gentle and kind, and he just safely brings Hagar back into the promise.

[22 : 27] The rollercoaster dips, but he never lets it collapse. And he only just blesses her even more. It's like God is saying here, I know what you've done.

I know what you're going through. Now come back. Let me fix this mess, and let me just love you even more. We have such a generous God.

And Hagar realizes that, verse 13. So she called the name of the Lord who spoke to her. You are a God of seeing. For she said, truly here I have seen him who looks after me.

And again it's such beautiful language. God is the one who sees me in my mess. when you have no hope and nowhere to turn, and you've made a mess of everything, God sees you.

He doesn't forget, he doesn't abandon, no, he sees. And he looks after you. Just like Hagar, he comes to heal and restore, to bring us back and to transform the mess.

[23 : 37] And how? through forgiveness in his son. Whatever mess you might be in right now, however much you have doubted God, however far you have wandered, whatever Eden you have been trying to build for yourself, if you will return to the Lord now, and come to the Lord Jesus who has come to find the lost, when you return, God will only look after you.

And there will be complete forgiveness. Whatever you've done, he won't hold it against you, he doesn't tell you to pay for it, he doesn't hold back any blessing, no, he forgives.

And his grace is always there to restore the mess of our lives, to begin to heal the pain of our failures. He helps us forgive others.

He helps us see where we have sinned in all this mess. And he promises to bless us even more, to finally one day restore the mess completely and make all things new.

There really is a light at the end of the tunnel. And so the rollercoaster may dip, but with the Lord Jesus it never collapses, he looks after you. In our ruined lives, in our affliction, we can't take things into our own hands anymore.

[25 : 06] And so what else is there? There is the grace of God. But we must realise, though God does find and forgive us, this doesn't mean the consequences will go away in this life.

Ishmael doesn't go away, does he? Sarai still had to live with Hagar. these events couldn't be undone, the consequences don't disappear. And so likewise, we may still live with the consequences of our sin.

Maybe for the rest of our lives. The memories may still remain, the scars never completely fade this side of heaven. God doesn't make our mess disappear, tear, but he does atone for it.

And whatever mess is still there, he gives it a new meaning in your life. Look at verse 11. Look what God says to call Hagar's child.

You shall call his name Ishmael because the Lord has listened to your reflection. The name Ishmael literally means God hears.

[26 : 24] And look what the well was called, verse 14. Be'er lehi roi, which literally means well of the living one who sees.

These could be painful reminders of sin. Ishmael could be a walking reminder of Sarai's doubts and Abraham's failures. This well could be a haunting reminder of Hagar's sin and the low point of her life.

But God finds her, forgives her, and gives a new meaning to these things. With this new name, Ishmael is now a constant reminder, a monument of God's grace.

Every time they see him and say his name, it is not their sin God brings up, it's his grace. They look back at this mess and now they can just know God hears me in my trouble.

And if Hagar were to ever walk past that well again, it could have been a painful monument for her. But now she can walk past and God tells her, I don't want you to remember your sin.

[27 : 36] I want you to remember God sees me. And that's what God has done with the monuments of our sin. those scars, those consequences, those memories, all that mess, the Lord Jesus has taken them and not only paid for them but transformed them and given them a new meaning, a new name.

They are no longer reminders of our sins and failures but they are now monuments of God's grace to you. Those scars are monuments that God rescued me from that life.

Your past is now a monument declaring God sees me even though I didn't see him. Our foolish choices are now monuments that show God looks after me even when I didn't care about him.

And the Lord Jesus has washed all my guilt away. And so if things of your past still haunt you, if like Hagar you walk past a well that could remind you of your failures, let it now remind you of God's grace.

It could overwhelm us with regret and despair but God wants it to drive you to praise. Praise for his mercy and grace.

[29 : 05] And whatever mess we might be in right now and it feels like God is distant, like he doesn't see, trust him, wait for him, hold to his promises right now and never forget you may not see him but God sees you.

And so we can go into this week saying those beautiful words, God sees me and God always looks after me. Let's pray.

Amen.