

Work it Out

Genesis 16:1-10

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A. Choices (vs. 1-3):

1. Had borne – After leaving Haran to move to Canaan, in obedience to God (Gen. 12:1-3), Abram lived in Canaan 10 years, and Sarah had yet to give birth to a child. This is after God promised Abram that he would be the father of a nation (Gen. 12:1-3; 15:5). At Sarai's age, it seemed unlikely that she would become pregnant.
2. So Sarai said - The desire to become what we want to be - Sarai wanted to be a mother, as it was culturally expected and embarrassing not have a child - should not lead us to forsake God's agenda or take matters into our own hands, especially when it takes time to unfold. We experience God's agenda for our lives only when we trust His promises as we wait for Him to fulfill His Word (Isaiah 40:27-31; Lamentations 3:25-26). Examples of those who waited on God and were blessed:
 - a) Joseph waited maybe 20 years for the dream God gave him to come through. In the midst of waiting, he suffered much (Gen. 37-45).
 - b) David was anointed king but had to wait 12 years before becoming king. He refused to take matters into his own hands and kill Saul (1 Sam. 24).
 - c) Simeon faithfully served God, waiting for the coming of the Messiah (Luke 2:25-32).
 - d) Anna waited for the coming of the Messiah, as well, serving in the temple for decades (Luke 2:36-38).
3. Behold the Lord has prevented me – While persistently speaking to her husband, Sarah lets Abram know that it is not her lack of fertility or her and Abram not trying, but it is God who is restraining her from having children. This is something God is not allowing.
 - a) The problem of her barrenness was mentioned back in 11:30, but it had been exacerbated by the promises made to Abram in 15:4 that he would have a real son, not just an adopted one. And as Sarai was "Abram's wife," that seemed to imply she would bear a child.¹
4. Behold the Lord has prevented me – Even though Sarai is actually right in stating that God is preventing her from having children, forcing her to wait on His timing, she still should not nag her husband into submission so that she can have her way. Please note that there had to be other women among all the people who served Abram and Sarai who were having children.

¹ Wenham, G. J. (1994). [*Genesis 16–50*](#) (Vol. 2, p. 6). Word, Incorporated.

5. Please go into my maid - Abram found himself between God and his wife's demands. Sarai, in her desperation, demanded her husband put aside God's Word and follow the Nuzu law provisions, which allowed her to have a surrogate mother. Sarai was determined not to continually live under this embarrassment.
- a) The plight of Hagar should draw sympathy from the reader, for she was an unfortunate woman caught in the web of Abraham and Sarah and their faltering efforts to achieve their destiny, and she was the abused and rejected woman who, with the birth of Isaac, was suddenly very much in the way.
6. I will obtain children – Because it is God who is averting her from having a child, she is confident that Hagar will continually have children. Sarai seems to believe that what God is doing is only to her. Please note the personal pronoun 'I'. This is going to be her way of having her child, since God has gotten in the way of her being a mother. Sarai has taken this as God's attack on her.
7. I will obtain children – How many times, when God seems to bless others, we act as though God has something against us, even though we clearly understand His Word. Waiting on God to fulfill His promises, when we have the power to resolve it ourselves, can be extremely difficult.
8. Abram listened to the voice of Sarai – Abram gave Sarai his full, undivided attention with an understanding heart, intelligently understanding everything she was saying and feeling. We know Abram was concerned about this issue because he presented an option to God since he and Sarai were not having children (Gen. 15:1-6).
- a) Abram consulted God (Gen. 15:2-6), and Sarai didn't (Gen. 16:3-6).
- b) It was a serious matter for a man to be childless in the ancient world, for it left him without an heir. But it was even more calamitous for a woman: to have a great brood of children was the mark of success as a wife; to have none was ignominious failure. So throughout the ancient East polygamy was resorted to as a means of obviating childlessness. But wealthier wives preferred the practice of surrogate motherhood, whereby they allowed their husbands to "go in to" (בוא אל) their maids, a euphemism for sexual intercourse (cf. 6:4; 30:3; 38:8, 9; 39:14). The mistress could then feel that her maid's child was her own and exert some control over it in a way that she could not if her husband simply took a second wife. So Sarai here expresses the hope that she may "have sons through her." "The verb as it stands (אבנה) can only mean 'I shall be built up.... At the same time, however, it is an obvious word play on בן 'son' " (Speiser, 117).²
12. After Abram had lived ten years in the land – Abram's 10 years involved separating from Lot (Gen. 13), dealing with rescuing Lot from the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 14), meeting with Melchizedek, meeting with God (Gen. 15), and then comes Sarai frustrated for a lack of a child, especially after God kept saying they would have a child. It

² Wenham, G. J. (1994). [Genesis 16–50](#) (Vol. 2, p. 7). Word, Incorporated.

is not like Abram was having a great day every day because he was called by God and blessed by God.

- a) Abram was now 85 years old.
 - b) Although advanced (12:4 – 75 yrs. Old) in age at the time of his call, Abram would live for another full century (25:7).
 - c) Abraham was 86 when Ishamael was born (16:16).
13. Took – By saying Sarai took Hagar it means Sarai took the initiative, purposefully went and got Hagar, and was completely resolved to do whatever it took to resolve this issue herself. This all took place right after God renewed His commitment to bless Abram. His wife's frustration, accumulating over time (10 years passed; not like she did not wait), moved her to no longer listen to God. There are times when God seems silent while we wait. We must still learn to trust Him. It is a call to faith (Psalm 28).
- a) A handmaid was still a servant under her mistress's authority, but because she attended to personal and domestic needs, she often had daily, intimate access to the family. This closeness could lead to trust and affection, but it could also create tension, as seen in the relationship between Sarah and Hagar.
14. Gave her to her husband – Sarai actively and persistently put Hagar in Abram's hand, with no intention of stopping the process. Abram realized that Sarai would not relent until this was accomplished. The situation had reached a boiling point.
- a) Notice the passage says Hagar was given to Abraham as his wife.

B. Unforeseen Challenges (vs. 4-6):

1. He went in to – Abram, who remained with Hagar until it was clear she was pregnant. Sometimes, in our disobedience, God allows the results we desire – or fear – to occur. This means God does not always remove the consequences.
2. When she saw – When Hagar realized she was pregnant, her attitude towards Sarai changed.
3. Was despised in her sight - Hagar no longer respected Sarai. She was dismissive and argumentative in Sarai presence, which was highly disrespectful, especially in front of other employees. Many who traveled with Abram saw what Hagar was doing.
4. And Sarai said to Abram – Sarai was not going to tolerate Hagar's contemptible attitude. She kept telling Abram, with no intention of stopping, all that was taking place.
5. May the wrong done to me be upon you – Sarai blames Abram for the injustice. Although Sarai began this disobedience, Abram, as head of the house, allowed it, knowing God's recent words (Gen. 15). In this way, their actions parallel those in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3:1-10).

6. Gave my maiden into your arms – Sarai implied that because Abram accepted her suggestion and took Hagar, he now bore responsibility for resolving the outcome. Like in the Garden of Eden, the husband’s choice had consequences (Rom. 5:12 – sin entered when Adam bit the fruit). Disobeying God’s Word on the advice of a spouse makes the individual responsible before God (James 4:17).
7. Gave my maiden into your arms – If we act on what our wives say, especially when it violates the Word of God, God holds us accountable. The story of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5) illustrates this, as Sapphira’s participation in wrongdoing made her guilty as well.
8. May the Lord judge – After dismissing God’s Words to Abram and acting on her own, Sarai calls on God as arbitrator. She wasn’t crying out for justice over Hagar but for Abram to lead and solve the threat she faced.
 - a) May the Lord judge between you and me: An expression of hostility or suspicion (31:53 and 31:49).
9. Abram said to Sarai – Abram continuously kept speaking to get Sarai’s attention. In reading these verses, it seems this is an argument between Abram and Sarai. Sarai wants Abram to take charge, and he is not interested. It is as if Abram is saying, “You wanted a baby, well now you got one.”
10. Behold, your maid is in your hands - Abram, most likely with Hagar nearby, handed Hagar over to Sarai. In other words, Sarai placed Hagar in Abram’s hands now Abram is using his authority to turn Hagar back over to Sarai. Because he is physically, most likely publicly handing her over to Sarai, Hagar is quiet. Sarai has now been repositioned to a position of authority.
11. Her harshly – Sarai did not do what was excellent and pleasant (meaning of the Hebrew word for good), instead Sarai continuously, with no intent on stopping, made sure Hagar was emotionally distressed. Sarai was intentional about it.
 - a) The story has both a dark side (Sarai mistreated her maidservant) and a bright side (the Angel of the Lord communicated with Hagar in the desert). There is no problem seeing what went wrong in the dark side of the story. When the way of faith (which involves patient waiting) was abandoned and the way of human calculation was taken, Abram was caught up in a chain of causes and effects that would trouble him for years to come. (Ishmael became the ancestor of the Arabs, who are still hostile to the Jews.)³
12. Her harshly – It is interesting how, when major problems protract, even Godly people can become so distressed that they behave as Sarai did. The Bible calls Sarai a great woman of God (Hebr. 11:11; 1 Peter 3:5-6), showing that Godly people are not perfect.

³ Ross, A. P. (1985). Genesis. In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Vol. 1, pp. 56–57). Victor Books.

After Hagar returns, no further drama is reported until Isaac and Ishamel come into conflict (Gen. 21:8-9).

- a) And ... Sarai dealt harshly with Hagar - [Hebrew, *wat^a`anehaa* (OT:6031), meaning oppressed, afflicted, or would oppress, afflict her.] The term implies that Sarai, in her violent bursts of resentment, frequently had recourse to blows or threatened to do so. Eventually, Hagar, perceiving the hopelessness of this unequal strife, resolved to escape from what had, both in reality and in name, become to her a house of bondage. (from Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary, Electronic Database. Copyright (c) 1997 by Biblesoft)

13. She fled – Sarai became so abusive that Hagar, pregnant and distressed, fled abruptly, with no intention of coming back.

a) In desperation Hagar fled in the direction of her homeland, Egypt. She was still legally a slave and had no right to run away. Her situation, however, had become unbearable, and flight seemed to present the only relief. She probably thought she might find peace, rest, and life in her old home country. When she reached Shur (*the wall*), she paused before crossing the border. Here the Egyptians maintained a wall or strong line of forts to protect Egypt from invaders from the east. It is mentioned in Egyptian records as early as 2000 B.C.⁴

C. God, Always at Work (vs. 7-10):

1. Angel of the Lord – Due to Abram’s lack of leadership in the home, God intervened. Rather than sending an angel to Hagar, Jesus Christ Himself met her and convinced her to return. The term ‘Angel of the Lord’ means ‘You are the God who sees me.’ Like in the Garden of Eden, Abram was the passive head of the house.

a) Traditional Christian interpretation has held that this "angel" was a preincarnate manifestation of Christ as God's Messenger-Servant (that is, one who delivers messages and carries out tasks on God’s behalf). However, as the Lord's personal messenger who represented Him and bore His credentials, the angel may have spoken on behalf of (and been identified with) the One who sent him (see especially 19:21; 18:2, 11; 19:2). Therefore, whether this "angel" was the second person of the Trinity remains uncertain. Shur is located east of Egypt (see 25:18; 1 Sa. 15:7).

b) **“The angel of the Lord” (מלאך יהוה) is mentioned fifty-eight times in the OT, “the angel of God” eleven times. Angels of the Lord appear either singly as here or in groups. When first seen, they are usually taken to be men, but by the end of the encounter one of them is realized to be God (18:2, 22; Judg 6:11–22; 13:3–22).**⁵

⁴ Pfeiffer, C. F. (1962). *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary: Old Testament* (Ge 16:7). Moody Press.

⁵ Wenham, G. J. (1994). *Genesis 16–50* (Vol. 2, p. 9). Word, Incorporated.

2. Found her; Happened to us, befallen us - God intentionally sought after Hagar, who apparently was already some distance from Abram's camp, and visited the place where she was sitting.
3. Found her; Happened to us, befallen us - I love how gently and compassionately God responds in this difficult moment. Hagar faithfully served Sarai. She was Sarai's maiden, meaning she was always by her side. There was no trouble before this. She trusted this dilemma. God watched it all, loving her deeply, even though she stood outside His covenant promises. How tenderly God reveals Himself as the God of grace and mercy.
4. Where have you come from – Christ immediately shifted to why He visited Hagar. He did not need directions. Hagar was somewhere unchangeable. She had nowhere to go and was trapped.
5. Where are you going – The Lord repeatedly asked Hagar this rhetorical question because she had nowhere to go. Egyptians did not like Semites (descendants of Abram), and she was now pregnant with their child. Therefore, she could not return to Egypt, nor did she want to go back to Sarai. This story highlights a central truth: In our effort to run from a problem, we often end up disillusioned, more distressed, and aimless.
6. Said, fleeing from Sarai – Hagar continued to speak honestly with the Lord. She was not surprised that the Lord spoke to her and continued the conversation. It is unclear if she understood God's relationship with Abram and Sarai, though she was close to Sarai.
 - a) Behold, as the eyes of servants look to the hand of their master, as the eyes of a maid to the hand of her mistress, so our eyes look to the Lord our God, until He is gracious to us. (Ps 123:2; NASU)
7. Said, fleeing from Sarai – We may experience difficult circumstances that make us want to run. However, when the Lord speaks to us, even if He requires us to endure hard circumstances, we should listen and submit to His way. His blessings are certain.
8. Angel of the Lord said to her – It is interesting that, the Lord initially does not command her to return but instead continues to speak with her, urging her to return. The Lord Jesus spoke to Hagar very persuasively, without stopping. This was the best thing for her, and therefore it is what she must do.
9. Return to your mistress - Return to what? That is a good question. She is returning to a man who does not love her (Abram), a woman (Sarai) who threatens her harshly, and to bear a child who is technically not her child; the child belongs to Abram and Sarai.
 - a) The "angel's" heartening word to Hagar was that she should go back to the hard situation she had left, take up her burden, wait for the fulfillment of the divine plan, and look for the day when her son, Ishmael, should become the head of an important tribe. Ishmael (*God heareth*) was to be a "wild ass of a man," with strength and daring, and a ferocious disposition. He would live wild and unshackled, in the wilderness, without friends or loyalties. His descendants were destined to

grow into a mighty horde of Bedouins, wild, free, treacherous, reckless men, roaming the open spaces of the desert.⁶

10. Submit yourself to her authority – The reason why the Lord would state this is that it is better to be with the promises of God literally than to be on our own. I would rather be in a Lion’s Den than to knowingly sin against God. If abiding in God’s purposes creates suffering, we must remember that *“the sufferings of this present time don’t compare to the glory to be revealed.”* (Romans 8:18; James 1:12; Rev. 3:21) God has seven thousand promises in the Bible, and He is faithful to accomplish them all. She was more blessed in a bad situation to do what the Lord said than to be outside of His will, isolated from His blessings.
11. Greatly multiply – Because Hagar is pregnant with Abram’s child, the promise of God extends to her.
12. Greatly multiply – Being in the will of God can be messy (Psalm 34:17-19). There are lots of examples, including Christ’s life on earth. God blesses those who endure to the end (Hebrews 10:36 – *“For ye have need of patience, that, after ye have done the will of God, ye might receive the promise.”* Rev. 2:10). If we don’t grow weary, God will bless us with a great season of much fruit (Gal. 6:9; John 15:1-10).
 - a) God’s servants are to trust His Word and to wait for its fulfillment, enduring patiently till the end. It becomes increasingly clear in Genesis that any person or any nation that owes its existence to divine election should live by faith. Human efforts will not help. But the good news for God’s people is that the living God sees and hears.⁷
13. Too many to count – What God had promised to Abram is now promised to Hagar.
 - a) Hagar accepted God’s will because she trusted in His promises.
14. Too many to count – Life can take us in all kinds of directions, but because of God’s faithfulness to His promises, *“all things work together for the good to those who love Him and are called according to His purposes.”* (Rom. 8:28) She became a mother of a great nation rather than remain a handmaiden. It worked out for her good because when we place ourselves in the hand of God, who is powerful, perfect, and loving, there is no way we will not become blessed.
 - a) Ishamel became a warrior (Gen. 16:12) and an excellent archer (Gen. 21:20-21).
 - b) He married an Egyptian woman (Gen. 21:21). God made him the father of twelve princes, just as He promised (Gen. 17:20; 25:12-16; from ChatGPT).
 - c) He lived to 137 years old (Gen. 25:17).

⁶ Pfeiffer, C. F. (1962). *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary: Old Testament* (Ge 16:9). Moody Press.

⁷ Ross, A. P. (1985). *Genesis*. In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Vol. 1, p. 57). Victor Books.

- d) The descendants of Ishmael are modern-day Arabs, blessed with incredible wealth that silently existed beneath their tents even at the time of Hagar: the wealth of oil.⁸

⁸ Hughes, R. B., & Laney, J. C. (2001). [*Tyndale concise Bible commentary*](#) (p. 16). Tyndale House Publishers.