

The futility of shortcuts

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[0 : 00] Well, do make sure that your Bibles are open in front of you to the book of Genesis. There's also a sermon outline available for download on the website, or it should have been WhatsApp to you if you're a member of this church, and it will be helpful to have as well.

And just like in previous weeks, I'll use Abraham and Abram pretty much interchangeably, so don't get distracted by that. Well, let's ask God to work in us as His Word comes to us this morning.

Heavenly Father, we just pray, Lord, that even this morning, perhaps there are some of us who feel a bit far from you, some of us who need to come to a fresh knowledge of you, and we just pray, Lord, that you help each and every one of us to be ready and be prepared to receive that.

Please help me to preach your Word faithfully, and that your Word will go forth to accomplish its purposes. All this we pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

It's hard to wait, isn't it? Some of us have recently waited in line for hours under hot and sweltering conditions to receive our vaccination. Others of us can still remember, though it feels like a lifetime ago now, waiting in airport lounges, wondering when we can board our long, delayed flight.

[1 : 28] It can be hard to wait. But what makes waiting especially hard is when the person we're waiting for is just so slow. There's an animated film called Zootopia, which Chin-Yin and I watched not long after we moved back to Kuching.

This movie is all about Judy Hopps, the first rabbit to join the police force, who is determined to prove herself by solving the mysterious disappearance of several animals.

And there's a scene which captures this agonizing weight for others perfectly. Officer Judy and her happy-go-lucky partner visit a government office, which happens to be staffed entirely by sloths.

And what we're going to do now is to watch this scene unfold. Well, I was hoping you could run a plate for us. We are in a really big hurry. Sure.

What's the plate? Number. Number. 2-9-THD-03. 2-9-THD-03.

[2 : 48] T-H-D-03. H-D-03. D-03.

D-03. Zero. Three. Hey Flash, want to hear a joke? No! Sure.

What do you call a three-humped camel? I don't know. What do you call a...

Three-humped camel. Three-humped camel. Pregnant. Ah! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Ah!

Ah! Ah! Ah! Yes! Very funny, very funny. Can we please just focus on this? Hey! Wait, wait, wait! Priscilla! Oh, no! Yes?

[3 : 56] Flash? What do you call? A three-humped camel? Pregnant! Okay, great, we got it! Three-humped. How did you feel watching that scene?

Impatient? Frustrated? Exasperated? Then you know how Sarai feels in today's story. You see, up to this point, God has seemed pretty active.

In Genesis 12, we watched God speak to Abraham, making him big promises that he's going to provide him with land and descendants, and that he's going to be a blessing to the entire world.

We watched God swoop into Egypt after afflict Pharaoh with plagues and ensure that Sarai doesn't remain as part of his harem. We watched God orchestrate a dramatic victory for Abraham over four powerful kings with a tiny army all in one night.

And last week, in answer to Abraham's question, we saw God leading him outside to the clear, dark sky, dotted with an amazing constellation of stars, and tell him, that's how many your offspring is going to be.

[5 : 16] God is providing him with a glimpse of things not yet seen. And in an almost theatrical ceremony, God seals the covenant with this vision of a smoking fire pot and a blazing torch passing through chopped up animal pieces.

He's declaring to Abraham, I'm going to fulfill what I said I'm going to do. Otherwise, may I end up like these cut animals.

God makes a binding oath. And so the anticipation builds up. The expectation increases. The excitement multiplies.

Except that it's now ten years since Abraham and Sarai have been living in the land of Canaan. But the nursery they've prepared remains unoccupied.

The toys lie around, untouched. There is no excited squeal. No childish laughter. There is only silence.

[6 : 25] Every evening, it's just the two of them staring into the sky. And as they see the stars, I can only imagine just how they must have felt.

The weight is agonizing. But God is just so slow. He was so active before.

But now, he's a Slav. He's fallen asleep. He's forgotten everything. That's how it must have felt to Sarai. I wonder if you feel the same way today.

How long have we been in this pandemic? Less than two years, but it probably feels like 20. More than one of you have lamented to me, this pandemic feels never-ending.

Perhaps some of us, many of us even, have been waiting and waiting for God to act. But it seems like he never does.

[7 : 24] Some of us have been praying and waiting for other things. We've been waiting for relief from the chronic pain or illness that we're suffering from. We've been waiting for relief for caring for the pain or illness of others.

We've been waiting for that special someone to walk into our life because we long to be married and have a family. We've been waiting for a prodigal to come home.

We've been waiting for revival to come to church. We've waited. But God seems so slow. He's worse than a sloth.

And the agony is starting to become overwhelming. That's where Sarai is at. Is God going to keep his promise or not? Is he even bothering with our prayers or not?

Is he keeping us permanently in the waiting room? Perhaps we need to hurry him along. For today, God's word is going to meet us in the waiting room.

[8 : 30] We're going to look at Genesis chapter 16, which takes place over two scenes. And in each of those scenes, God is going to say, when you're in the waiting room, here's what you need to remember.

Here's what you need to hold on to. Well, let's discover what they are. And so scene one, when you're in the waiting room, remember the futility of shortcuts.

Remember the futility of shortcuts. It's been 10 years. And still there's no children, no sign of Genesis 12 being fulfilled. And Sarai gets discouraged.

She's beginning to lose faith. And so she begins to scheme. She thinks, God's clearly not moving, so it's time to take matters into my own hands.

What do I have? She looks around and sees verse 1, an Egyptian slave named Hagar. That's what Sarai has. And so that's what she's going to use.

[9 : 32] Have you been in the place of Sarai? As you waited, you got discouraged, and you decide it's time to do things your own way. It's time to make use of your own resources.

It's time to take a shortcut. So how is that going to turn out? Let's find out. What shortcut does Sarai take? Well, verse 2, since she is a slave girl, why not make full use of her?

Why not get her husband to sleep with her? Now, this probably sounds shocking to our ears today. But try to immerse yourself in the ancient Near Eastern culture of Abraham's day.

To be childless in those days was considered a very serious matter because it left a man with no heir. And it left a woman branded as a failure with nothing but shame as her lot.

And so it was common for many of the cultures, many of the societies of that time, to use a female slave to bear a child should her mistress stay barren.

[10 : 42] The Code of Hammurabi, some of you might remember learning that from your Sejarah lessons, records such provisions as to some other texts from Assyria and Babylon and so on.

And so Sarai's proposal, which seems absolutely scandalous to us today, would not have been treated as such in her world. It would have been normal.

It would have been a perfectly reasonable thing to do. Besides, technically speaking, she's not doing anything that's strictly contrary to the promise, is she?

Yes, God promised Abraham that he would give him descendants, but he didn't specifically say that Sarai must be the one to bear children, right?

Isn't Sarai simply being resourceful? Shouldn't we be applauding her for taking the initiative to problem solve rather than remaining passive? Well, that's what shortcuts often look like.

[11 : 43] They sound reasonable. They might even sound spiritual. Why not use the ways of the world to accomplish the purposes of God?

After all, wouldn't God be glorified since it means his promise would have come true? It's what we whisper to ourselves as we photocopy entire Christian books still under copyright, without permission, because, hey, wouldn't people benefit from the truth within?

It's what we whisper to ourselves when we pick someone to lead the music ministry or teach Sunday school because, hey, isn't she so gifted and attractive and, most importantly, available?

Never mind that her grasp of doctrine is not strong and her character and her character a little suspect. It's okay, right? If it means a lot of people will come to know God as great.

We don't want people to know God as a slothful God. God will understand. Well, perhaps that's what Sarah whispered to herself. I'm just helping God along with his timeline, she might have taught.

[12 : 53] I'm just acting to bring his promises to fruition. Except, she's deceiving herself. For just as Jesus will point out centuries later, the mouth speaks what the heart is full of.

And so to understand Sarah's heart, look at what Sarah says, verse 2. The Lord has kept me from having children. At first glance, she appears to be echoing Abraham's concern over the lack of an heir back in 15, verse 2.

But what's the difference between her and her husband? Well, back in chapter 15, Abraham at least brings his concern to God. But here in Genesis 16, Sarah hatches her little scheme with no reference to God.

She never talks to him. She never seeks him. She's motivated purely by her own desires. She blames God because her desires have been frustrated.

God has kept me from having children, she says. And then, end of verse 2, she is determined to fulfill her needs regardless of what God's actual plan or timeline might be.

[14:07] Perhaps I can build a family through her. Notice, through Hagar, not through God. There's no actual concern for God's promises to be fulfilled.

It's simply about her personal desires to have a baby. That's what it's all about, really. It's simply about executing her plans to meet her desires. As this passage was being read out earlier, I wonder if you notice how Sarah is the one constantly doing things throughout verses 1 to 4?

She's the one doing the planning. She's the one speaking to Abram. She's the one taking and giving. She's portrayed as unquestioningly the one in charge.

She's trying to be God. And so it can be with us. We have particular desires. Some conscious, some subconscious.

And often there are good desires. A child, good grades, a supportive spouse. But we don't currently have them and we want them now.

[15:18] And we do whatever we can to achieve those desires. We try to be our own gods, hatching our own plans, plotting the shortest possible way to get there.

So to get good grades, we cheat. Or to get that dream spouse, we start entertaining thoughts of marrying that nice non-Christian boy or girl. We pursue fulfillment through our own means.

Now at this point, Abram could have still stepped in. He could have stopped Sarai in his tracks and said, Honey, don't you think are being carried away?

He could have reminded Sarai of all that God had already said and all that God had already done. But sadly, verse 3, none of that happens.

Abram simply agrees with Sarai. And suddenly, this scene begins to feel a little bit like déjà vu. Because as we observe what's happening here in verse 3, we begin to realize that Abram and Sarai remind us of another couple.

[16:31] Who else, do you remember, should have stepped in but listened to his wife instead? Who else took something and gave it to her husband who also accepts it?

And as we'll see in a moment, who else, through wrongful action, has to suffer the consequences. The way the language is phrased in verse 3 leaves us in no doubt what the narrator wants us to see.

This is Adam and Eve falling all over again. The shortcut looks reasonable. It might even look spiritual.

But it's clearly a step in the wrong direction. You see, that's how Old Testament narrative often works. Old Testament narrative rarely gives us direct statements.

What so-and-so did was wrong. But what it often does is to show us, via echoes and patterns and repetitions, how a character's actions should be viewed, whether favourably or unfavourably.

[17:42] And when you see a recycling of the fall, you know you should be screaming at Sarai, stop! stop! Stop! And it doesn't help verse 3 that we're told that Hagar becomes a wife of sorts to Abram.

But we know that Genesis 2 sees marriage as a one-man, one-woman relationship. And when we think of the only other time polygamy has been really referenced in Genesis so far, we end up with Lamech back in chapter 4, who is a vengeful murderer.

That's hardly a promising precedent. And so taking this shortcut is clearly a bad idea. But both Abram and Sarai take it anyway.

After all, it works. In verse 4, Abram sleeps with Hagar and she conceives. It brings about the intended result. But hold on a second, is that all that it brings about?

Now let me briefly bring you back into the modern day first, to help you see where we're going next in the story. In 1989, Mexico City introduced a car rationing scheme to curb air pollution.

[18 : 58] The city's government prohibited 20% of vehicles to be on the road during week days, based on the last digit of their license plates. At first, it seemed successful.

But then, people began buying more cars to bypass this restriction, especially used cars that were very high polluting. And three years later, the UN declared Mexico City the most polluted city on the planet.

Research showed that their policy and its effects made carbon levels rise up by 13%. The solution led to unintended consequences, which made things worse.

things and that's exactly what happened to Abram and Sarai. Verses 5 to 6 is basically a catalogue of unintended consequences, as their shortcut leads to all sorts of relational chaos.

Hagar begins to despise her mistress, and in one sense, who can blame her? she's been treated as nothing but an object, a plaything all throughout, and so naturally, she becomes antagonistic.

[20 : 12] The connotations of this Hebrew word translated despise is not easy to work out, but it could also possibly carry the sense of looking down upon.

Hagar looks down on Sarai. For now, the slave girl has achieved what her mistress could not, bear a child.

And so what happens is that Sarai's shortcut takes her to a place she did not intend to go. She finds not happiness, but bitterness instead.

Her desire is fulfilled, yet she remains unfulfilled. And so she begins to play the blame game, another echo of Genesis chapter 3.

Verse 5, then Sarai said to Abram, you are responsible for the wrong, I'm suffering. She plays the victim card, appealing even to God.

[21 : 12] And verse 6, she takes it out on Hagar. Earlier in 15 verse 13, God foretold that Abraham's descendants would be mistreated in Egypt.

But that doesn't stop Sarai from doing the exact same thing to her Egyptian slave here. And Abraham, by the way, doesn't come out looking good either. Given that Hagar is both his second wife and the mother of his first child, he's amazingly indifferent to her.

Just do whatever you want with her, he says to Sarai in verse 5. There's no concern, no sense of responsibility at all. And so Hagar flees.

It's all a mess. Hagar has lost her job and a place to live. Abram has lost a wife and a child. Sarai is left with nothing but bitterness and marital conflict.

Everything's gone wrong. Here lies the futility of shortcuts. Here lies the futility of trying to hurry God and hatching our own plans apart from him.

[22 : 27] Abram and Sarai got a son, but not the son God intended, and it unleashed a whole set of unintended problematic consequences.

My brothers and sisters, do you see how foolish it is whenever we act out of a lack of trust in God and his word? Do you see how foolish it is to try to accomplish God's plans by using worldly ways?

There's absolutely no doubt that waiting is hard. Sarai has been waiting ten years. And as you attend another wedding as a single person, or as you hear news of another friend giving birth, or as you go for yet another round of treatment, or another year slips by since your child left the faith, it's tempting to look for shortcuts, isn't it?

They're attractive. They promise freedom, they promise fulfillment, but they never deliver unless you're looking for disaster. Only God can, and he has his own purposes, some of which he tells us, some of which he doesn't, for leaving us in the waiting room.

And while we're there, he pleads with us, I know it's hard, but remember the futility of shortcuts.

[24 : 04] But thank God that's not all we have to remember, because Genesis 16 has a second scene, and in scene 2, God has another reminder.

When you're in the waiting room, remember the eyes and ears of God. Remember the eyes and ears of God. We now join Hagar on the road to Shur.

That's Egyptian territory. It makes sense, doesn't it? It has her place of birth, that's where her comfort zone is. But is that where she should end up? That would have been a very interesting question for the first readers of Genesis.

For don't forget who the first readers are, those in the Exodus generation. And they too, like Hagar, are in the wilderness. And Egypt is beginning to look very attractive indeed.

And it would have been tempting to go back. And so the question as they read on is, should they? What happens next? Well, in verse 9, the angel of the Lord appears.

[25 : 13] There's a bit of debate. Some of you might be aware of who that is. Some suggest it's actually God himself. For down in verse 13, we're told that it is the Lord who spoke to Hagar.

And if so, this is what biblical scholars sometimes call a theophany. But then again, angels are messengers, and they often act as a mouthpiece for the Lord, such that the message they bring could be said to be from God himself.

Just like an ambassador is said to be bringing a message from the president of the country himself. So it could be just an angel. Now, whichever way it is, it doesn't matter too much for Genesis 16.

For either way, it is still effectively God speaking to Hagar. And how significant that is.

So far in this story, no one has spoken to Hagar or with Hagar. Indeed, notice that whenever Sarai speaks of her in verses 2 and 5, she is only referred to as my slave.

[26 : 26] She is never named. Instead, she is objectified and passed around like an instrument. She is powerless and voiceless. We have yet to hear her speak.

But now, incredibly, God comes and addresses her by name. Verse 8. This is so completely unprecedented.

No other story in the whole of ancient Near Eastern literature has God addressing a woman by name. She is the only woman in the whole of Genesis to receive a visit from the angel of the Lord.

And she has a voice. This is no monologue. In Genesis 16, the one person Hagar is able to speak to is God.

You see, while we're on the road, feeling a little lost and confused, God never leaves us all alone. He seeks out the rejected. He seeks out the sinner.

[27 : 37] Well, that's what Hagar is, given that she despises her mistress, understandable though that may be. He seeks out those on the run, those going the wrong way.

Think of how God never lets Jonah go, even when he's running the opposite direction from his given destination. And it's exactly what we see in the life of Jesus, as he too seeks out and speaks to the Samaritan woman by the well, the sinful woman in Simon the Pharisee's house, or the Syrophoenician woman with a demonized daughter.

God is the powerful one, but unlike Abram or Sarai, he's on the side of the powerless. And that's what makes verse 9 seem surprising at first glance.

Go back, he says. Go back to your mistress and submit to her. Go back to the one who mistreated you and chased you away. Go back and submit to her.

It's a challenging command, isn't it? It reminds us of similar commands in 1 Peter 2, where Christians are commanded to submit to the anti-Christian emperor, submit even to harsh masters, and live good lives amongst them.

[29 : 04] What's going on? Well, let me just quickly mention what this is not about. This isn't an encouragement for those living in abusive environments to run back to their abuser.

Please don't hear me or Genesis 16 as saying that. Instead, the clue is in what God says next, verse 10. God makes a promise to her.

I will give you so many descendants, you can't count them, he says. And straight away, we can't help but notice, God is making a promise to Hagar that is strikingly similar to the one given to Abraham.

Abraham. Now, verses 11 and 12 make clear that it's not exactly the same. And next week, in Genesis 17 verse 20, God makes clear that this is not the covenant line.

This is not the line through whom God will execute his great redemption plan. But, it is still a line that God is willing to bless.

[30 : 12] God shows his kindness even to Egyptians. But as is so often the case in the Abraham story, it also means that Hagar now has a choice to make.

In fact, it's the very same choice that Sarai had to make. Will she submit to God, trust in the word of promise, go back and wait in faith?

Is she willing to be in the waiting room as well? That's what this is really all about, whether Hagar will follow in the footsteps of Sarai or not.

And the end of this story tells us what choice Hagar made. She went back, she bought Abraham a son, and she names him Ishmael, just as the Lord had asked her to.

There is no refusal, no rejection, no challenge. Instead, she shows a remarkable trust in God's promises, that what he says he would do, and responded with obedience.

[31 : 20] Why? What enabled her to make such a choice? Answer, because Hagar saw two very important things about God.

Firstly, she came to realize that this God is the God who hears. ish. But that's what Ishmael means, as the NIV footnote will tell you.

She has been voiceless thus far, but God hears her. Is that not remarkable? That would have been a great reminder and comfort to the very first readers of Genesis, the Exodus generation.

But they too would have been reminded how when they cried out to God, when they were oppressed in Egypt, they would have remembered how God heard them, as Exodus 2, verse 24 to 25 and 3, verse 7 tells us.

They would have been reminded how they were at the Red Sea, at the dead end, and once again, they cried out, and once again, God heard them. Our God is a God who hears.

[32 : 31] When we cry out, He listens. When we groan, He knows all about it. As the psalmist says in Psalm 142, I cry out before the Lord, I lift my voice to the Lord for mercy, I pour out before him my complaint, before him I tell my trouble.

And why can the psalmist do so? Because, he continues, when my spirit grows faint within me, it is you who watch over my way.

For that's precisely the second thing Hagar realizes about God. He is the God who sees. In verse 13, she does something remarkable.

She names God as such. No one else does that in the Bible. For so many people have not seen Hagar, but she realizes God did.

And she acknowledges that. Now, we don't know if Hagar even knew who God was up to this point, but God certainly knew her.

[33 : 41] He knew her name. He knew her situation. He knew her need. And he met her with gentleness and tenderness and a promise of a great blessing, even as he asked her to turn around and return to the path that God had set out for her.

my brothers and sisters. You see, this is what God wants us to remember in the waiting room. He knows the days are long and many.

He knows the fears can be real and the worries overwhelming. He knows the moments when everything feels unfair and unjust. And he wants you to know he hears.

He wants you to know he recognizes what you're going through. And as the scholar Gary Miller says, prayer is God's gift to help us cope with life in the mess.

And indeed, God doesn't even need you to be articulate in your prayers because the Holy Spirit knows better than we do what we mean and is able to express that for us.

[34 : 53] Romans 8. And when you feel like crying out to God and giving up crying out to God because well, nothing has changed, know that he's ready to hear you tell him that too.

He doesn't want you to suppress the pain. He's ready to hear complaint. Indeed, if there are no tears, then the promise that one day God will wipe away every tear from our eyes will not be necessary.

But because he knows that there will be tears in this broken world we live in, he's ready to listen and meet you with his gospel promises.

And he is the God who sees you in your affliction. He's not blind to your situation. He knows what sort of family history you've come from. He knows how you're biologically wired.

He sees the evenings in lockdown when you feel friendless and companionless. He sees the shame you feel because your body doesn't work like it used to and you feel like a burden to others.

[36 : 01] He sees the time you feel unappreciated and undervalued. He sees the unequally yoked marriage, the financially stressed family, the perpetually anxious student.

He sees you in your affliction and he meets you there. But here's the other thing Genesis 16 teaches us.

It is that we can see God in our affliction. That's the difference between Sarai and Hagar, isn't it?

Sarai lost sight of God. Hagar gains it. For often God doesn't just meet us in the mountains, he meets us in the valleys.

God doesn't just meet us in the daytime, he meets us in the darkness. And in the darkness of night, he invites us to see him.

[37 : 01] He invites us to trust him. Even when the way is long, even when it scratches for 10 years or more, he's there.

We just need to open our eyes. God's eyes. You see, there are some of you today who have lost sight of God.

Like Sarai, you only see the barrenness of your situation. Like Sarai, you're therefore tempted to manipulate the situation to your own ends.

Like Sarai, your desires have become a substitute God. And so today, God's inviting you to once again see the one who has always seen you.

The one who's already acted on your behalf. For at just the right time, God makes a birth announcement to another woman, Mary, who appears to have conceived via improper means.

[38 : 07] And God also tells her to name this baby. this time as Emmanuel, God with us. And this baby Emmanuel, God with us, will have everyone's hand against him.

But he responds, not with hostility, but with grace, as he silently bears his afflictions as he is nailed to the cross.

And any time, he could have come down from there, but he waited until it is finished. He is treated like a slave.

And then he rises again, vindicated as the king. And now, God waits for you to see him again, to acknowledge who he is, to worship him, to obey him, to go back on the road that he has called you to.

Not because he is slow in keeping his promise, but because he is patient with us, not wanting anyone to perish, but for everyone to come to repentance.

[39 : 26] we are just so slow. But he is patient with us, just as he is patient with sinners like Abram and Sarai.

He is going to use them still. And today, even as he reminds you of the futility of shortcuts, he is ready to meet you in the waiting room again, and turn his face towards you or eyes and ears.

Are you ready to meet him afresh today? Let us pray. Heavenly Father, you know everyone's situation who is listening in today.

You know the various waiting rooms you have placed them in. You know how they are coping with it. And so Father, we pray Lord that you will be softening each and every heart to be turning to you again, to open the eyes that we might see you afresh, and that you will open our mouths to cry out to you in prayer because you are the God who hears.

Thank you indeed that you are the God who hears and the God who sees and the God who gave yourself in the person of your son Jesus. God and because of him, we can stand secure because we know that the promise of the gospel has already passed the test.

[41 : 17] It has already been fulfilled. And so Father, please help us to hang on to this unshakable gospel every day even as we wait for this pandemic to be over, even as we wait for various trials in our lives to be over, even as we wait for our struggle with sin to be over.

All these things, Lord, help us to wait well and help us to look forward to that day when you will once again fulfill your promise and wipe away every tear from our eyes.

And so we commit each individual into your hands today and we pray especially that your word would be working in their lives. all this we pray in the name of Jesus Christ.

Amen.