

Genesis 16:1-16 // East of Eden

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Preacher: Josh Stocks

[0:00] Tonight's reading is from Genesis 16, from verse 1 to 16, which can be found on page 16 in your Bibles.

! So that's Genesis chapter 16, starting from verse 1. He slept with Hagar, and she conceived. When she knew she was pregnant, she began to despise her mistress. Then Sarai said to Abram, You're responsible for the wrong I am suffering.

I put my slave in your arms, and now that she knows she is pregnant, she despises me. May the Lord judge between you and me. Your slave is in your hands, Abram said.

Do with her whatever you think best. Then Sarai ill-treated Hagar, so she fled from her. The angel of the Lord found Hagar near a spring in the desert.

[1:37] It was the spring that is beside the road to Shur. And he said, Hagar, slave of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going? I'm running away from my mistress, Sarai, she answered.

Then the angel of the Lord told her, Go back to your mistress and submit to her. The angel added, I will increase your descendants so much that they will be too numerous to count.

The angel of the Lord also said to her, You are now pregnant, and you will give birth to a son. You shall name him Ishmael, for the Lord has heard of your misery.

He will be a wild donkey of a man. His hand will be against everyone, and everyone's hand against him. And he will live in hostility towards all his brothers.

She gave this name to the Lord who spoke to her. You are the God who sees me. For she said, I have now seen the one who sees me. That is why the well was called Beer-Lehai-Roi.

[2:47] It is still there between Kadesh and Bered. So Hagar bore Abram a son, and Abram gave the name Ishmael to the son she had born.

Abram was 86 years old when Hagar bore him Ishmael. This is the word of the Lord. Juliet, thank you so much for reading.

Good evening. Please allow me to add my welcome to Alan's. For those of you who don't know me, my name is Josh. I'm one of the ministry trainees here at St. Silas. And it's my privilege to take us through this passage tonight. This is a tricky passage, but we can see that God is a good God in it. Before we start, I'm gonna pray for it. So let's bow our heads and pray for our time together.

Heavenly Father, we thank you that you are the God who sees. We thank you that you are the God who hears.

We thank you that you are the God who rescues. We thank you that even in the midst of brokenness and difficulty, we can trust you. We know that when we submit ourselves fully to you, you will not leave us wanting.

[3:50] Lord, we pray for this time. As we sit under your word, we pray that what is good and true and is of you will be remembered. And anything that is false and flighty and lighty and human would be forgotten.

In your name. Amen. Well, before we start my sermon tonight, I'm gonna give you a very quick disclaimer. Those of you who know the story of the Bible will know that Abraham and Sarai become named Abraham and Sarah.

I will do my level best to get the names right, but if you can bear with me and not keep a running tally of all the times that I call them Abraham and Sarah, I would appreciate it greatly. So tonight we are looking at a story, and I'm calling our sermon East of Eden, because in John Steinbeck's famous novel, The East of Eden, the characters wrestle with what it means to live in a world dominated and corrupted by the sins of other people.

The novel starts when a wife shoots her husband. She runs away to become a prostitute and a murderer. Her sons grew up with the bitterness of this, fighting against each other, struggling with jealousy and envy, until eventually one of them is killed in war, which shatters the other one. On every page of that novel, the devastating consequences of sin seem to reign. However, the novel ends. Spoiler alert for a book that's been out for more than 50 years. The surviving brother is told that he has the choice to rule over sin, not to be defined or controlled by the sins of his past and his parents.

[5 : 26] He may rule over his own destiny. Sounds good, doesn't it? As humans, we long to live in a world free of sin, but so often we go about trying to live free of sin without God.

We try to make it ourselves. We want to find a solution to the brokenness in the world about us with our own strength. Today's passage is a story just like that, where human beings try to get around what they see as the problems in the world their own way.

But we also get to see a glimpse of the wonderful way in which God will redeem humanity and lead them back to the place of blessing. While human beings are seizing and taking and grasping, the grace of God is at work to bring about his good and gracious promises.

So first of all, let's set the context for our passage. Last week we heard from Azariah in Genesis 15, what was arguably one of the highest moments of the whole biblical story so far.

God made a covenant, a solemn promise, a binding oath with Abram. God put himself in the place of the one who will bear the consequences of the broken promise.

[6 : 43] He promised Abram a new land, new multiplication, new fruitfulness. At the end of Genesis 15, we had this tantalizing taste of what a world restored to Eden might look like.

And more importantly, we saw a man who obeyed the word of the Lord. In verse 6 of chapter 15, we read these words, Abram believed the Lord and he credited it to him as righteousness.

If only Adam had been so faithful in the garden, perhaps we would be in different circumstances today. So in our chapter today, we've got Abram, a figure who looks like he might be a better Adam. We have the promise of a new land. We have the hope of multiplication again and fruitfulness. And as we finish Genesis 15, we can't help but wonder, maybe this is it. Maybe this is the moment when it all starts to go right again.

But we've all just heard tonight's passage. So we know how the story goes. Let's have a look at how it all unfolds. Our first point, don't trust the wrong voice.

[7 : 48] In our first section, we see Abram and Sarai, who just like Adam and Eve, try to twist the plans and the promises of God. They try to get to the things, the blessings which God has promised them.

But they try to get to them via a shortcut. They know what God has promised them, but it's not happened for them yet. Despite now living in the promised land of Canaan, Sarai has borne Abraham no children.

That's one for those of you keeping count. The promise to Abram has yet to come to pass. As we read verse one, we're asking ourselves, will we get a godly response to this lack, to this unfulfilled promise?

No. In fact, the further we look in verses two to six, the worse it gets. Rather than a return to the blessing of Eden, we get the fall of Genesis three all over again.

In Abram and Sarai, we see the worst characteristics of Adam and Eve, and it has similar results. We're going to examine both of these characters in turn. So let's start with Sarai.

[8 : 57] Notice where our story begins tonight. Because it doesn't begin the way you might expect. You might say, Abram had no children. But rather it says, Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children.

The author of Genesis has chosen to put Sarai right up front and center, to place her center stage. We hear her very first recorded words in the Bible in verse two.

The Lord has kept me from having children. You see, Sarai looks around at her situation. She looks about. She looks at the barrenness and the lack of promise.

And she decides that it is God who is to blame. She undoubtedly knew the promises of God, which had been given to Abram. But she fails to trust God to do what he's promised them.

Like Eve, back in Genesis three, she does not trust the word of God. Like Eve, she twists God's words by stating that despite his promise, it's God who has kept her from having children.

[10:03] It is the Lord who's kept me from having children, she says. She blames God for not fulfilling his promise rather than trusting that he's going to bring his good and gracious promises to past.

She doesn't trust that God's going to bless her with children. Now, at first glance, this might seem hard on Sarai. After all, she's in a difficult circumstance. She's just trying to get to what God has promised he will do.

But as we look a bit deeper into this story, we can see that the author has gone out of his way to paint Sarai in a very negative light. In verse two in our Bible, we read the phrase, Abram agreed to what Sarai said.

However, the Hebrew is identical to Genesis 3.17, which says, Adam listened to the voice of his wife. And if we continue that set of examinations, we're going to see that Sarai follows exactly the same set of actions as Eve.

There should be a slide. Okay, if we can have that. Yeah, there we go. I hope you can read that. But what it shows is it shows that Eve and Sarai in these passages do exactly the same set of actions in exactly the same sequence.

[11:19] Sarai took Hagar just as Eve took the fruit. Sarai gives Hagar to Abram just as Eve gave the fruit to Adam.

It's exactly the same process. Both Eve and Sarai look around at their circumstances. They find them wanting. They take something which they shouldn't and they give it to their husbands.

The author of Genesis brings this point home even harder to his first audience. That first audience of Genesis were those Israelites who were sitting, waiting on the edge of the promised land, hoping to see all that God had promised them come to pass.

In verse 6, the phrase is Sarai ill-treated Hagar which doesn't sound great but it doesn't sound horrendous either.

We might be tempted to think that this is something a little bit like Downton Abbey where the servants received sharp-tongued rebukes from their well-to-do bosses when the milk is curdled or the tea is spoiled.

[12:22] But not much worse than that. It would have sounded much worse to the first audience in Genesis. This phrase, the ill-treated phrase, is the same phrase that is used in the book of Exodus to describe how the Israelites were treated by the Egyptians.

So that phrase is used to describe the level of labor and oppression that the Egyptians are using in an attempt to wipe out the Israelites. This is more Gulag archipelago than Downton Abbey.

The author continues that comparison with Hagar's circumstances and the Egyptian circumstance throughout the passage. The word used for Hagar's escape from Sarai in verse 6 is the same one that's used for the Exodus.

So Hagar, an Egyptian slave, is abused by her Israelite mistress. So she exodus back to Egypt. In the Exodus, the Israelites are abused by their Egyptian masters.

So they flee to Israel. The author has used this language deliberately for his first audience so that they see in Sarai the foreshadow of Pharaoh. Sarai's similarity to both Eve and the way that she foreshadows Pharaoh make it abundantly clear to us that her actions, her plans, her conduct are potentially sinful.

[13:48] Consider the lesson that we can learn from Sarai about what it means to live as a human in this broken world. See, there will be times in your life when the word of God looks weak. When it seems that the promises and the plans of God will not be fulfilled.

Sarai and Eve both show us a very human temptation. Look around for a way to fix it yourself. Seize. Take.

Grasp. But the difficulty is if we listen to that voice the only thing that we get is suffering. As the story unfolds Sarah's plans and actions only increase her pain.

While in the immediate aftermath it might look like her plan has worked as Hagar conceives she soon finds herself status lessened. Her slave being proudful over her.

Her position in Abram's house is now threatened. And she becomes bitter and resentful. The destructive consequences of her sin can be seen even a decade later as her treatment of other human beings and her faith in God are both found wanting.

[15:00] You see, the thing is sin never works. We all come to seasons and times when the word of God seems forgotten. When we look around at our lack and we're tempted to believe the snake.

But let the story of Sarai remind us sin never works. It will only ever be a weight that drags us down. Now you might be sitting here listening to all this and thinking well of course Josh it's obvious this was a terrible plan that was awful I would never do such a thing.

But let's remember our context. The author has made it very clear that Sarai's actions are sinful. But the reason that he has to do that is because in the context her actions would have been more acceptable.

In the ancient Near East this kind of surrogacy was more accepted. Let's not be too quick to let ourselves off the hook because each and every one of us knows what it's like to look around at life and think this is not what God promised me.

This is not where I was planning on ending up. And we all know what it's like to be tempted to take the shortcut. To do things the way that God wouldn't have us do but to do things the way that works in the world.

[16 : 15] Being a Christian does not mean that we receive the promises of God once by faith and then have to fight and scheme to get blessing. We do not have to twist God's arms to receive his ongoing blessing or promises.

We are saved by faith. We continue by faith. Being a Christian means trusting in the plans and purposes of God every single day.

if we go outside of God's ways to try and get to what he has promised us we are in very dangerous territory. We should not be like Sarai and try to get to the plan of God at the expense of others.

The ends do not justify the means. Let's now turn our attention to Abram for a moment here. So remember verse 2 paints a whole story in the colors of Genesis 3. When we remember that we can begin to see that Abram looks an awful lot like Adam just not the way that we were hoping.

Despite the fact that he previously believed God in chapter 15 here he listens to his wife instead of God just like Adam in the garden.

[17 : 28] Adam in the garden was utterly passive. He didn't silence the lies of the snake. He didn't stop his wife from taking the fruit. And Abram like Adam fails to act.

When Sarai comes to him saying God is not faithful God is not keeping his promises Abram fails to correct her. See his patient quiet reliance on the promises of God has curdled at least for now into passivity and apathy.

At this point in the story of Genesis when push comes to shove he is willing to trust in a different way of doing things instead of the promises of God. Rather than rejecting the offer of Hagar he chooses to go along with Sarai and like her he abuses a woman who is being treated as property. His apathy and abdication of responsibility don't end there. When the scheme backfires very predictably and Hagar's social standing is elevated by her conceiving a child Sarai becomes wrathful and bitter.

She lashes out and what does Abraham do? He backs off. He drops his responsibility. Confronted with his wife's anger he backs down and says do what you want with her.

[18 : 43] It's not a good look. Verse 6 is not a flattering line for one of the patriarchs of the Bible. Rather than protecting the woman he has taken as his wife and who is now the mother of his child he does nothing.

In the face of destructive sinfulness neutrality is not neutral. In Genesis 2 God had given Adam his wife to love and place before himself but Adam chose to place his autonomy his self-destructive desires above what God has said and here Abram repeats Adam's mistake and instead of doing what is right by protecting Hagar he cowardly places his own selfishness and comfort above her value and dignity.

While the focus of this passage is on Sarai on her scheming her lack of faith her bitterness we shouldn't allow the passivity and the apathy and the rejection of responsibility by Abram to slide by unnoticed.

Abram like Adam in the garden sins through his failure to listen to and trust the word of God. Like Adam in the garden he fails to crush the serpent. He fails to say no we are going to keep trusting in the good word and the promises of God.

instead he looks at the fruit that his wife offers him and finding it pleasing to the eye he takes it for himself. It's really important here to feel the weight of what happens to Hagar.

[20 : 12] Hagar is a slave. She's already right at the bottom of society's ladder. She's owned as property by another human being. It seems likely that Hagar was given to Sarai during their stay in Egypt so she's not just a slave but she's an outsider and an outcast.

She's been taken from her homeland her family and sold to a people whose culture identity and language are not her own. As a human being she's been made in the image of God with all the dignity and value that comes with that.

As a wife she should have been able to trust her husband to love her and give himself up for her. As an Egyptian she was one of the people of all nations which God's covenant with Abraham was meant to bless.

Instead of blessing Sarai and Abram take her and place sexual slavery on top of the existing burden of servitude that she already has. They degrade her value and her dignity.

They do not protect her as someone who has the image of God. Abram does not give himself for her or protect her but he uses her and discards her. And neither Abram nor Sarai seem to give a single thought to her once she's fled.

[21 : 28] Hagar was not blessed by Abram or Sarah in this story. There might be people in this room for whom the story of Hagar hits close to home. People who've experienced abuse at the hands of those who should have cared for them.

You might be sitting here tonight and know what it's like to have had a husband or a father a mother or a wife a leader or a sibling who should have cared for you should have looked out for you but instead they used you and they abused you.

Some of those people who've done those things might even be the people that the church has held up as examples as leaders as people to follow. This story shows us in a horrific startling clarity that even those who the church upholds as good can be utterly sinful.

I don't want to brush aside the pain and the hurt and the anger that rightly flows in response to those actions but as we continue in our passage I hope that you will come to realize that God knows you.

God knows your pain. God knows what's happened to you. God knows every hidden thing which no one else knows about. I hope as we progress you will see that God is a God who rescues.

[22 : 50] God is a God who sets things right. This story has shown us so clearly that sins crash like dominoes one following the other. So rise.

Sin starts with simple unbelief. It just starts with a simple I'm not sure God is going to do what he has said but it leads to her seeking after the blessing of God and to pursue the promises of God in her own strength and it leads to more and more and more devastating consequences.

Her unbelief gives birth to consequences which are still having devastating impacts decades later. Sarai doesn't get what she wants. She doesn't get what she was hoping for. She faces another 13 years of barrenness and bitterness.

Abram has to deal with the consequences too as he tried to shortcut the plans of God. when God's sovereign plan is finally brought to fruition in the birth of his son Isaac he loses Ishmael whom he clearly loves.

Even Hagar is not immune to the temptations and the consequences of sinfulness. In the middle of the story we see that she fights and scraps for position and pride and it comes back upon her and her descendants.

[24 : 03] Her son spends his whole life fighting for position. His descendants will sell Joseph into slavery in Egypt and further on their descendants will rule oppressively over Israel in the time of the judges.

None of the characters here escape the consequences of listening to the wrong voice. But hallelujah we can trust the right call.

We've seen what humans do east of Eden and it's a mess. But now as the story comes to a close gloriously we get to see the grace of God at work.

From verse 7 the story follows Hagar. Hagar flees her mistress hoping to return to her native land. And let's feel the drama of the story here for a moment. This is a bad situation for this woman. She is a young woman. She's alone. She's penniless. She's pregnant and in the wilderness. She's a runaway slave. But God is the one who intervenes.

[25 : 05] God comes searching for her. God calls to her. In verse 7 the angel of the Lord appears and calls to Hagar. And once again we get a little glimmer back to the garden.

We can remember that God called in a similar way to Adam and Eve and they hid and lied and blamed other people. But notice the difference this time. Unlike Adam and Eve who try to shift the blame her reply I'm running away from my mistress is completely honest completely forthright.

Hagar doesn't for a second dissemble or distract or shift the narrative. She doesn't try to self-justify. There's absolutely no attempt despite all the justification in the world to shift the blame to Sarai. Hagar is a slave who is fleeing her mistress and she admits to that. She admits to the state of slavery to the crime of running away. If this was a person who was calling her if that person was a sinful selfish human being they could have done anything they wanted to her legally.

But gloriously and graciously this is the God who sees. Hagar is met by God and the interaction between the two of them tells us and Hagar who God is.

[26 : 21] What his character is like. So first of all he is the God who sees. Look down at verse 13. You are the God who sees me. And then she names her son Ishmael.

Ishmael means God has heard me. This young woman alone in the wilderness is met by and cared for by God himself. She's alone, she's hungry, she's thirsty, she's wandering in the wilderness and God sees her.

God comes to her. Once again that story of Hagar would strike home for the first Israelites. Imagine yourself having spent years under the oppression of slavery only to flee into the desert and find yourself stuck, lost, lonely, hungry, thirsty and you hear this story and you look at your circumstance and you see the rescue of God coming.

In the midst of suffering God shows himself to be the one who sees and hears and rescues. In the midst of human sinfulness and suffering God reveals himself as the one who sees you, as the one who hears your trouble and rescues you from it.

That is who God is. He's a God who rescues the outcast, the broken and his grace is available to you. If you're here tonight and you feel lost God would tell you I see you, I came to rescue you.

[27 : 53] With the interaction with the angel over Hagar returns to her mistress. And let's be really clear here about what's going on because this isn't an easy thing. That phrase in verse nine submit to her comes from the same word as ill treatment.

The charge from the angel of the Lord is not go back to Sarai and it'll all be peachy. You'll be happy families, it'll be a great time. The call is go back and face suffering and hostility and oppression.

But it's so important to see that the call to obedience is made on the basis of the character and promises of God. God has seen, God has heard, God has rescued.

Therefore in the light of knowledge of who God is we can faithfully submit and obey in the face of suffering. Throughout the story we've seen attempts to manipulate God's plan end in chaos and disaster.

As those of us who follow God in a broken world we're called to obey God. That will often mean walking directly into the face of suffering and difficulty. But we don't do it blindly.

[29 : 03] We do it knowing who our God is that he sees and hears and rescues. what is the result of Hagar's submissive obedience?

Blessing. Hagar is given the same promise as one of the same promises as Abram. I will increase your descendants so that they will be too numerous to count. What a joyous moment.

This woman who is suffering and lone and who's been looked on with contempt by all those around her is seen by God and given a promise of such unparalleled blessing.

That blessing will play out in many ways in the lives of these characters both good and bad but we can see God at work in her life and unlike Sarai and Abram who tried to get round to the promises of God by taking shortcuts Hagar submits she faithfully submits to the word of God trusting that he's going to fulfill his word to her her choice to faithfully submit to that plan and promise points us forward to someone else who does the same thing.

As Jesus begins his ministry he goes out into the wilderness we can read this in all the gospel accounts he goes out and faces temptation after his baptism he goes into the wilderness like Hagar like Hagar he's alone he's vulnerable he's hungry and that old serpent Satan the snake comes and tempts him he says to him Jesus you can have all the promises of God you can have everything he said he'd give you you can rule and reign over the whole world just take this one little shortcut just sidestep and bow to me instead do you see that it is the same temptation which seduced Abram and Sarai trying to get to the promises of God by twisting the plan and the purposes but you see Jesus knows which voice to listen to he rejects the snake he says forget it I'm going to trust in the word of God he walks forward faithfully submitting to the suffering to come

[31 : 16] Jesus doesn't try to manipulate or twist the plan of God but he faithfully submits himself to abuse to scorn to punishment ultimately to death the call to submit our lives faithfully to God even when this means hardship and pain is not a call which comes from someone who doesn't know

what they're talking about Jesus calls us but he walked that road ahead of us he knows what it means to lay his life down and so when he calls us and says faithfully submit to the word of God we can do it knowing that he is a savior who sees us who hears us who rescues us so what does this story teach us that while human beings plot and scheme and seize and sin God sees and hears and rescues and he does it via the most unlikely method imaginable through the faithful submission of his vulnerable people as we live in this land east of Eden let's cling to God's faithful word let's look to our savior who willingly walked into suffering for our sake let's follow him in obedience choosing just like Hagar to obey his words knowing that blessing awaits us let's pray before the band come and lead us in song

Lord our God we thank you that for the entire story of your people you have seen and you have heard and you have rescued those who are oppressed by sinfulness that Lord as we wrestle with the destructive consequences of the sins of other people or the sins of our own making Lord we thank you that there is grace awaiting us that there is a promise that you will rescue us Lord as we examine this story let us never be tempted like Abram and Sarah to try and get your blessing without you let us instead choose to faithfully submit our lives to your words no matter the cost knowing that that is what your son did and that one day we will meet him and be blessed by him forever Amen let's stand to respond as the band lead us in worship may