

# The Cost of Compromise

*The Life of Abraham: A Study in Genesis 12-22* Sermon 6

Genesis 16

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Is it ever okay to compromise? Is it ever okay to lower standards, accept less than the ideal, or make concessions in order to get something done?

When it comes to human plans and opinions, we must be willing to compromise. If we can't compromise with friends and family—whether in picking a restaurant or vacation spot—we won't be much fun to be with, always demanding our own way. And think of Congress: rare is the bill that gets passed without compromises by both sides. When it comes to our ways, compromise is not only okay, it's often good.

But when it comes to God's plans, His purposes, and His ways, compromise is never okay. When we decide we know better, that we'll do things on our terms and compromise in regard to God's plans and ways, not only is it not okay, it's costly.

This is the point of Hagar's story in Genesis 16. Compromise is costly.

In this passage, the people of faith don't outright reject God or His purposes. Instead, they compromise when it comes to *the way* God wants to bring things about. For the sake of expediency, and to relieve the pain of waiting, they devise a shortcut. They set out to bring about God's goals according to human plans. And in doing so, they compromise. And it's costly.

But this isn't the only message of Genesis 16. Through a surprising intervention of God, we also learn how God responds to the compromised. And we are given a better alternative to trusting in our own schemes and shortcuts: we are called to trust in the God who hears us, who sees us.

This will become clearer as we consider the two scenes that make up this passage. Scene 1, running from verses 1-6, details the compromise and its cost. Scene 2, verses 7-16, shows us what it looks like for the compromisers to meet grace.

## Scene 1: *The Compromise and Its Cost (16:1-6)*

In Genesis 15, God reassures Abraham that he'll have offspring and possess the land of Canaan. And He does so with an exclamation point: likening Abraham's offspring to the stars in the sky and cutting a covenant with him to guarantee his inheritance.

After the fireworks of chapter 15, the reader expects a baby announcement to open chapter 16: perhaps, *"And the time soon came when Sarai was with child."* But instead, delay continues. Only now—and for the first time—we will feel the pain from Sarah's perspective.

Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children.... (16:1a).

Time is running out for Sarah.<sup>1</sup> Ten years have passed since she and Abram set out under God's promises (v.3)—and still no child. Sarah must come up with an alternative plan. What this plan will entail is ominously foreshadowed in the rest of verse 1:

She had a female Egyptian servant whose name was Hagar" (16:1b).

Abraham and Sarah are well off. Keeping with the customs of the time, families like theirs had servants. Often the matriarch would have nurses and helpers whom she had authority over. It was also the custom that childless women could look to surrogate motherhood as a way to obtain children.<sup>2</sup> According to the laws of surrounding cultures, Sarah had every right to choose this alternative:

Sarai said to Abram, "Behold now, the LORD has prevented me from bearing children. Go in to my servant; it may be that I shall obtain children by her." (16:1b-2).

While the world dealt with barrenness through concubinage or polygamy, this was not how God designed things. In order for Sarah and Abraham to do this, God's design for marriage had to be violated. As demonstrated in Genesis 2, marriage is between one man and one woman—not one man and many women. But the aging couple is desperate, and there's plenty of cultural approval to support their decision.

As the scene unfolds, many commentators hear echoes of Genesis 3, where Eve's plans plus Adam's passivity create chaos:

And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai. So, after Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her servant, and gave her to Abram her husband as a wife. And he went in to Hagar, and she conceived (16:2b-4a).

Just as Adam was silent, so too, Abraham sounds no objections. And just as Eve "took" the fruit of the tree, and "gave" some to her husband (Genesis 3:6), so too, Sarah "took" Hagar and "gave" her to Abram. And just as Adam took and ate, so too, Abraham indulges.

The chaos ensues quickly and involves all parties. Hagar, victimized up to this point, now turns to victimize her mistress:

And when [Hagar] saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress. (16:4).

The phrase is repeated in verse 5, "she looked with contempt," for emphasis, and literally means, "*in Hagar's eyes, Sarah looked small, pathetic.*" As her pregnancy become more noticeable, it became an occasion—not for thankfulness—but for pride; a chance to humiliate the barren Sarah all the more.

Then there is Sarah. Our sympathies are with her at first. Barrenness in this cultural setting was the worst of humiliations. Then, as things develop, Sarah's troubles are only compounded. Still barren, perhaps now she will also lose the affection of her husband to his new Egyptian wife who is with child. But Sarah suddenly turns from a victim of childlessness to blame-shifting and her own form of victimizing:

And Sarai said to Abram, "May the wrong done to me be on you! I gave my servant to your embrace, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt. May the LORD judge between you and me!" (16:5)

And in verse 6, "Then Sarai dealt harshly with her [Hagar]" (16:6).

The phrase “dealt harshly” in verse 6 is used in Genesis 15:13, where it refers to the affliction the Israelites will endure under the Egyptians in decades to come.

There’s an irony here: Sarah, the mother of Israel, is afflicting a vulnerable Egyptian servant. Decades later, Egypt will be afflicting vulnerable Israelite slaves. The Bible doesn’t divide the world between good people and evil people. Rather, as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn noted, “The line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being.”<sup>3</sup>

Lastly, consider Abraham. His role in the scene could be defined by one word: *passivity*. He makes no objection to Sarah’s plans about Hagar. Then, after Hagar has been committed to him as his wife (v.3)—meaning, he knows he had responsibility to care for her—he pathetically turns her over to Sarah’s failing composure:

But Abram said to Sarai, “Behold, your servant is in your power; do to her as you please (Genesis 16:6).

Once again there are echoes of Genesis 3. The phrase “do to her as you please” could also read, “do what is good in your eyes.” This was where Eve was taken: “when the woman saw that the tree was *good* and a delight to *the eyes*” (3:6). Abraham is effectively saying: *act according to your law, never mind God’s ways*.

What a mess! Let’s pause and consider what this scene might be teaching us.

## **Compromise is deceptive**

I think the main thing to pay attention to is how *deceptive* compromise is. Because it’s a form of sin, its ways are subtle and subversive. Notice a few ways it deceives:

- **Expedient:** First, it deceives by presenting itself not as an outright rejection of God’s purposes. Rather, it presents as a more *expedient* way to bring them about. “When it comes to realizing the blessings God has for me,” someone says, “my way is better. I’ll do it my way.”

- **Lawful:** Compromise is also deceptive because it can leverage something lawful—at least lawful in the world’s eyes. According to the laws of customs of the ancient world Sarah lived in, she had a right to use Hagar this way.<sup>4</sup> We are deceived into compromising when we say, based on cultural standards, “this is my right.”
- **Works—in the short term:** Finally, compromise is deceptive because it can work—at least in the short run. It certainly seemed that by using Hagar to get a child, the dark clouds of barrenness would soon be lifted by the presence of a little baby in Sarah’s arms. Often, compromise deceives because it makes us happy—but only in the short term.

## Compromise costs more than we bargained for

As this scene unfolds, we also realize that while compromise may seem like only a small deviation from God’s ways, it often has a much larger impact—and that impact often affects the lives of others.

Think of the lasting impact of large-scale compromises that cultures have made. Consider when a culture—for the sake of expediency and profit—compromises on God’s desire for all human beings to be treated with honor and institutionalizes slavery. Consider how far-reaching the consequences are. The cost is felt for generations. Or consider when a culture compromises on God’s sexual ethics, and in the name of human freedom. It wreaks havoc on families and children, not to mention the psyches and hearts of individuals.

When human beings say to God, “we know better, we’ll do it our way,” it never works. It never, ever, works.

Individual, where are you being tempted to knock God off His throne? Where are you tempted to compromise currently?

Teenagers, you are going to be tempted to think God’s ways are bad for you; that God’s pathways for life are the opposite of self-realization, authenticity, and fun. You’ll be tempted to compromise. The story of Hagar is pleading with you—this never works.

Church, one of the reasons Christians gather every Sunday—for worship, prayer, hearing God’s Word, and fellowship—is to remind each other of the deceitfulness of sin. We gather so we can help protect

one another from the cost of compromise. Do you know of a brother or sister in Christ compromising on God's ways? Humbly, prayerfully, and lovingly, speak to them about it. God would spare them the chaos that will ensue.

This is the main point of scene 1: **compromise is costly.**

But the story of Hagar is far from over. Scene 1 ends with her fleeing from her mistress and scene two finds her in the wilderness of desperation. But scene two is brimming with hope and good news. Compromise is often driven by pain or panic. And in this scene, God reveals just how compassionate He is towards us—showing both that He comes to us in the mess of our compromises and shows us the way out of them.

## **Scene 2: *The God Who Hears and Sees (16:7-16)***

We next meet Hagar at a well in the wilderness, along the way to Shur.

The angel of the LORD found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur. (16:7).

It seems she is fleeing towards her home; Shur is on the way toward the northeastern border of Egypt.<sup>5</sup> And it isn't Abraham or Sarah that go to find her in her distress; it's the angel of the Lord. This is the first time the word "angel" appears in the Bible. It could also be translated as "messenger," and that is what's happening here. God has come to Hagar with a message.

It's hard to pin down who this shadowy figure is. But by the end of the scene, it seems there is no distinction in Hagar's mind between the "angel of the Lord" and the Lord Himself. For, Hagar doesn't say she saw "the angel of the Lord" in verse 13, but the Lord Himself: "So she called the name of the Lord who spoke to her, 'You are the God of seeing.'" (16:13).

Some Christians have wondered if this is, in fact, Jesus appearing to Hagar. We cannot be sure. But the scene certainly calls to mind that day when Jesus Christ visited the weary Samaritan woman at the well and offered her the real remedy to her sorrows (see John 4).

The angel asks her where she has come from and where she is going (v.8), not because he doesn't know, but to draw her out. He then commands her to return: "Return to your mistress and submit to her" (16:9).

This certainly isn't the angel excusing the harsh treatment Hagar was enduring. It seems more likely that her attachment to Abraham's family—she now is the patriarch's wife and soon-to-be mother of his child—the Lord wants her there to give birth rather than roaming the wilderness.

The rest of the scene involves the angel's prophecy that Hagar will have a son and that her offspring will be multiplied greatly (v.10). Her son Ishmael will be like the respected nomadic men of that time—never one to bend his neck to the yoke of anyone else ("a wild donkey of a man," [v.12] as the passage reads).

A feature of the rest of the passage, from verses 11-16, that I want finally to draw out, is that of *naming*. Three things are named, and in these names, along with what God does in this scene, we see how God responds to those of us who have made a mess through compromise, or who are being tempted to succumb to it.

First, Ishmael is named:

"you shall bear a son. You shall call his name Ishmael, because the LORD has listened to your affliction" (16:11).

Ishmael was a common Semitic name at the time, and means, "**God hears.**" Hagar will take this prophecy back with her to Abraham, and in verse 15 we read, "Hagar bore Abram a son, and Abram called the name of his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael" (16:15).

## **Lesson 1: *God hears your cries***

How could Hagar, Sarah, or Abraham miss the message? God was saying to the vulnerable and forlorn Egyptian maid, *I hear you*. And God was saying to the weary Sarah and Abram, who wondered if after ten years of praying if, God even cared at all, *I hear you*.

**“The God Who Sees Me”:** After Ishmael, Hagar gives God a name. This is the only instance in the Bible where someone names the Lord:

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.” (16:13).

**“Well of the Seeing One”:** Then in verse 14, the well is named:

Therefore, the well was called Beer-lahai-roi; it lies between Kadesh and Bered. (16:14).

If you have an ESV Bible, there is a footnote that explains that “Beer-lahai-roi means the *well of the Living One who sees me.*”

## **Lesson 2: God sees you and what you need**

So, the second lesson the Lord communicates is both tender and cautionary.

Tender, because what Hagar means when she says, “You are a God of seeing.” It is not only that God has noticed her but helped her: “I have seen him who looks after me.” Cautionary, because it also is a reminder to Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar, that when they make decisions, God sees.

One of the most important things a person can come to know is that God *notices* them. He sees you. One pastor writes of Hagar’s declaration:

God sees you as you really are. He sees you where you are. He sees where you have come from and where you are going. He sees what you need and what you do not need. And he sees what he wants to make of you and how that final, glorious product is to be achieved. You cannot see it. But it is precisely for that reason that you must lay your own wisdom aside and return to the path God has given you to walk in.<sup>6</sup>

While Hagar’s story is a vivid portrayal of the cost of compromise, there is another theme that shines brighter: the grace of God.<sup>7</sup> For the future of Abraham’s family, it could be said that Hagar is unimportant—that in fact, she and her son will only get in the way. She is, after all, an Egyptian; and her



son, as Paul will say later, “was born according to the flesh,” not according to faith in God’s promise (see Galatians 4:23). But God will not cast her off.

God comes to find us in whatever mess our compromises have made—in whatever mess a compromise you’ve made has brought to your life or family, and in whatever mess the compromises of our past have thrust upon our present. Without so much as a prayer being lifted up by Hagar, the angel of the Lord leaves his abode in heaven, wanders into the desert of Saini, and speaks to a lonely and forlorn woman.

The lesson of Genesis 16 is simple and points us to the Gospel: When it comes to the things that belong to God, let us stop trying to take matters into our own hands and do things our own way. Rather, let us entrust ourselves afresh, to the God who hears our groanings and sees our needs.

Friends, we are going to face hard things. We are going to know the pain of waiting. But let us entrust ourselves to the God who hears our affliction and sees exactly what we need.

The story of Hagar finally ends up being yet another story about our Lord’s heart:

No matter how far our sins have sent us away, He has sent His own son to find us. And do you know what His name is: *El Reh-oi’* (אֱלֹהֵי רֵאִי), *the God who sees me*.

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## Endnotes

1. As the narrator will tell us in a few chapters, “Abraham and Sarah were advanced in years. The way of women had ceased to be with Sarah” (18:11).
2. “The practice of surrogate motherhood is attested throughout the ancient Orient from the third to the first millennium BC, from Babylon to Egypt” (Wenham, *Genesis* 16-50, 7)
3. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago 1918-1956*, (New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 2002), 77.

4. "Sarah had a right to do this under the laws and customs of the time. Perhaps this was the way God intended them to get an heir. Perhaps Sarai had a point. Shouldn't he listen to his wife?" See James Boice, *Genesis: Volume 2*, 569.
5. See Genesis 20:1; 25:18; Exodus. 15:22
6. James Boice, *Genesis 12-36, Vol. 2* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2006), 573.
7. John Calvin, *Genesis*, 430, writes, "We are here taught with what clemency the Lord acts towards his own people, although they have deserved severe punishment.... Now he cast a paternal look upon Hagar so that his favor is extended to the whole family."