

## Study 4

# ATTEMPTED SHORTCUTS IN THE JOURNEY OF FAITH!

Genesis 16-17

### Bible Talk Discussion

What insights or observations from Sunday's talk did you find helpful, interesting or confusing? Note down any questions and see if you can answer them along the way.

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What shortcuts do you commonly take in life? It might be in terms of work, study, travel, cooking, building, reading....anything?

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### Growth Group Discussion

As we explore Abraham's journey of faith, we will encounter moments like those in Genesis 16 which remind us that Abraham's family is not always a model of perfection. Sometimes it's downright dysfunctional! And yet God is at work in the midst of all this to bring about the fulfillment of his promises he made to Abraham.



In our introduction to Sarai (11:30) we were told about her physical condition. And yet God had promised that a great nation would come from Abraham. In other words, he would have many many offspring (12:1-3). And in Genesis 15:1-6, it seems that Abraham is wondering how it will ever happen given their ongoing childlessness. God reassured him, but now in Genesis 17, things have reached a crisis point.

## Trying to Take a Shortcut

### Read Genesis 16

Have a look at the three characters who feature in chapter 16. What seems to be so wrong with all of them? Take some time to fill in the below table.

<b>Abram</b>	
<b>Hagar</b>	
<b>Sarai</b>	

1. What stands out for you about how each of these three people react to one another?

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Notice the language of v3, “Sarai took Hagar.....and gave her to Abram her husband as a wife”. Not only is Hagar treated like a possession to take and give, it’s actually the same language used in Genesis 3. At that time Eve’s actions are described in similar ways, “When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it.” Like Genesis 3, everyone has their own sin - arrogance, misplaced blame, neglected leadership.

Hagar the Egyptian servant flees south towards Egypt, but the LORD (we’re purposely left wondering if it’s an angel of the LORD v7, or the LORD himself v13) appears to her while she is at a desert spring near Shur. *(See map over the page).*



**2.** How would you describe the LORD’s attitude towards Hagar?

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**3.** What does the meaning of the name ‘Ishmael’ that the LORD gives the child (v11), and the meaning of the name that Hagar gives the LORD (v14), say about what Hagar is experiencing with God?

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**4.** How would you ‘rate’ the type of future God is promising for Ishmael? How would you compare this blessing to the covenant blessing God has for Abraham and his offspring?

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In some ways, Sarai and Abram in Genesis 16 are acting just like Abram and Sarai in Genesis 12 – they try to make their own shortcut to get what they want, even though

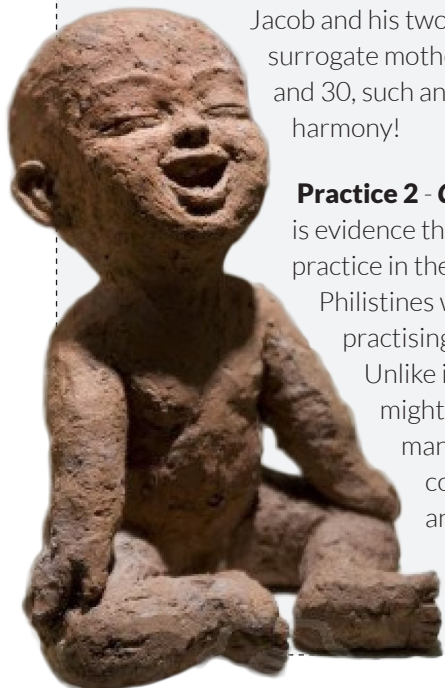
God has made faithful promises to them. These attempted shortcuts are no way to get God's promises. Their lack of faith represents a threat to the fulfillment of God's promises, but yet again God's faithfulness to them remains certain. Let's keep reading to see how God continues to express his commitment to Abram.

## Abraham and His World

**Practice 1 – Surrogacy.** The practice of surrogate motherhood for an infertile wife through her maidservant seems to have been an acceptable social practice at the time. Outside of Israel, we can read such documents as the Code of Hammurabi (1700 BC), a Nuzi text (1500 BC) and an Old Assyrian marriage contract (1900 BC) which sanctions the practices (Bruce Waltke, Genesis p252). We also see

this practice in Genesis 30. There, Abraham's grandson Jacob and his two wives take their maidservants as surrogate mothers. Given what we see in Genesis 16 and 30, such an approach is not a recipe for family harmony!

**Practice 2 - Circumcision.** Circumcision. There is evidence that circumcision was a widespread practice in the Ancient Near East. In fact the Philistines were thought to be outlandish for not practising it. (Derek Kinder, Genesis p130). Unlike in Muslim practice where circumcision might be done to mark the beginning of manhood, this circumcision is a sign of the covenant that God had with Abraham and his descendants, which is why it was done early on in the boy's life, at 8 days of age (17v12).



## Read Genesis 17

**5.** In Genesis 12 and Genesis 15, God has already expressed his commitment to Abram. But now the covenant is expressed again. What is being repeated that we've seen before in Genesis 12 and 15?

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**6.** What seems to be new?

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**7.** Throughout the Old Testament, circumcision is spoken of in different ways (See Deuteronomy 10:16; Joshua 5:8-9; Jeremiah 4:4) but what is the purpose of circumcision in this first instruction about the practice?

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**8.** Look at both Abraham's reaction in Genesis 15:1-6 (you might need to read over again to refresh your memory) and Abraham's reaction in Genesis 17:17-19. How would you describe Abraham's faith, and how would you describe God's response to him?

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**9.** How is this picture of faith and of God's response helpful for you?

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# At Journey's End



We will continue to follow Abraham's journey throughout this series, but the journey of faith is not actually completed until far into the future in the narrative of the Bible. Indeed, the New Testament picks up a number of things in Genesis 16-17 and applies them to Jesus and the salvation he brings.

The story of Hagar/Ishmael and Sarah/Isaac is picked up and used as an illustration by the apostle Paul in his letter to the Galatian Christians.

## Read Galatians 4:21-25

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*<sup>21</sup> Tell me, you who want to be under the law, are you not aware of what the law says? <sup>22</sup> For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and the other by the free woman. <sup>23</sup> His son by the slave woman was born according to the flesh, but his son by the free woman was born as the result of a divine promise.*

*<sup>24</sup> These things are being taken figuratively: the women represent two covenants. One covenant is from Mount Sinai and bears children who are to be slaves: this is Hagar. <sup>25</sup> Now Hagar stands for Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present city of Jerusalem, because she is in slavery with her children.*

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It's a passage that takes some thinking about to understand! Talk about it in your group and try to work it out. Here's some background that might help: In Galatians, Paul is writing to Christians who've been seduced into thinking that they need to obey Old Testament laws like food laws and circumcision in order to be acceptable to God. But Paul has been saying that what used to formerly divide people (circumcised Jews vs uncircumcised Gentiles) within the 'old covenant' no longer applies in the 'new covenant' – which is for those who have faith in Christ. If we go to law-keeping to find our acceptance in God, we don't find freedom but slavery. So Sarai, the free woman, who

received her child by God's promise is an illustration of this freedom. And Hagar, the slave woman, who was part of Abram and Sarai's short-cut approach to obtain God's promise, is a picture of attempted law-keeping, an illustration of slavery.

**10.** In what ways do you think we try to make our own short-cuts to God's blessings today, rather than simply knowing that blessing is the result of God's promises to us?

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## God's Worldwide Redemption Plan

It's been said, that while Pentecost (the coming of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2) was the birthday of the church, the events of Genesis 16-17 (the first circumcision) was the birth of Israel. The Israelite nation (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and their descendants) was marked out as distinct and different to other nations. Israel was the special recipients of God's covenant promises. There was also provision for people from other nations to enjoy the benefits of covenant relationship with God if they too were circumcised and joined the people of Israel (Genesis 17:12). But in Genesis 17 we're given a sense that in this covenant, the outward seal was always to be an external mark for what was supposed to be inward heart obedience (Genesis 17:1). And if we track through the history of Israel, it's so often the case that while the Israelites maintained the outward seal with much pride, there was often little to match it in terms of real inward, from the heart, devotion to the LORD. It is Jesus, the Son of God, who was fully obedient to the covenant to Abraham and it's his obedience that took him to the cross for our sin. No longer is salvation for the racial offspring of Abraham, but for all the nations who would come and have faith in Jesus.

**11.** How do God's dealings with Abraham help us to understand the nature of faith and salvation?

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# Pray

In the light of Abram and Sarai's attempted shortcuts to blessing, here's a few things to pray for:

- Give thanks that God is a God who keeps his promises for blessing and that he would do it through the family of his choosing. Give thanks that the promise of blessing came to ultimate fulfillment in the coming of his Son, Jesus.
- Give thanks that faith is not our perfect righteous act to earn salvation, but is our flawed and imperfect trust in God's perfect trustworthiness to give us salvation in Jesus.
- Pray that we would desire to live lives of faith in God's promise of salvation in Jesus, and that we wouldn't rely on shortcuts like religious-law keeping, morality, or any other way of trying to find blessing on our own terms.