

YOU: Connect. Grow. Serve. Go!
Spring 2019 Leader Commentary



Unit 1: The Faith Journey
Session 3: Now Hear This! (see pp. 110-113)

The Question: Whose voice are you listening to?

The Point: You cannot substitute any voice for God's voice.

Background Passage: Genesis 16

Focal Passage: Genesis 16:1-8,12

This commentary is designed to help you think about the question, "Whose voice are you listening to?" and drive home this one truth: You cannot substitute any voice for God's voice.

Focus on These Points

The Challenges
(Gen. 16:1-2)

Palestine was given to Israel and will be theirs entirely someday as fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham. We must remember the promise was given while Abram was still childless. According to all standards of Jewish and Oriental inheritance, Ishmael, the firstborn, would become the heir of Abram's wealth and the descendant of a promised line. But God's plan of a chosen nation did not include the son of Hagar the Egyptian.

Hagar was the personal servant of Sarah, who was given as a concubine to Abraham and became the mother of Ishmael (Gen. 16:1-16; 21:8-21; 25:12; Gal. 4:24-25). Pauline interpretation (Galatians) relates the superiority of a son born according to the Spirit over the son born according to the flesh. In Galatians 4 Paul used the Hagar story to stand for slavery under the old covenant in contrast to freedom of the new covenant symbolized by Isaac.

As the events of Genesis 16 unfold, Abram was eighty-six years old and still had no children. The aging couple had probably discussed the promised child many times. Human impatience drove them to adopt a cultural pattern common at their time and in their part of the world. Sarai suggested that Abram could father a child through her servant girl Hagar. It was the legally authorized custom of that time for a man who had no son to take measures that would ensure the orderly disposition of his inheritance when he died. He could adopt a son, as Abram had apparently already done (see 15:2-3). Or he could produce a son by cohabiting with one of the servant girls in his household. If a son were born as a result of such cohabitation, the inheritance rights of that son would supersede the rights of any previously adopted son. In a polygamous society, where men commonly had a wife and one or more concubines (as Abram did; see 25:6), sleeping with a servant girl was not nearly so strange or shocking as it might seem to us.

The Conspiracy (Gen. 16:3-6)

But the plan went awry from the beginning. Like Peninnah and Hannah (1 Sam. 1:6), Hagar despised Sarai, Sarai blamed Abram, Abram gave permission for whatever Sarai wanted to do, Sarai mistreated Hagar, and the horrors continued. Author W. H. Griffith Thomas points out that Abraham “was, of course, powerless in the matter as Hagar was her mistress’ absolute property. He could not interfere, and was compelled to accept the inevitable, and say that Sarai must do ‘as it pleased her.’”

All of Abram’s camp knew his wife was barren, and word of Hagar’s fertility probably traveled fast. But Sarai was not quite ready to be replaced as the mistress of the house. She never cared to see the child of that union, which she herself had suggested. Sarai’s jealousy eventually drove Hagar into the wilderness to escape bondage in Abram’s tent because of the child she carried.

The Consequences (Gen. 16:7-8,12)

The stage was now set for the birth of the Arab nation. Their ancestress, driven by a love of freedom, sat alone by a spring in the wilderness of Shur. There Hagar was met by the angel of the Lord. This designation is found with some frequency in the Old Testament (Gen. 19:1,21; 31:11,13; Exod. 3:2,4; Judg. 2:1-5; 6:11-12,14; 13:2-3,7,9-11,13,15-17,20-23). The angel asked two specific questions. Hagar told about her experience and why she was in the wilderness alone. The angel encouraged her to return to Sarai and submit to her and then offered her a promise from God as well: her descendants would be multiplied, she would bear a son, and the son would be called Ishmael, which means “God hears.” About this son the angel said he would be a wild donkey, would be fighting constantly with other people, and would live on the margin of civilization in hostility toward all his brothers. Like Samuel, Ishmael received his name from events in his mother’s life and not his own. All this happened at a well between Kadesh and Bered, a place where Isaac later lived (Gen. 25:11).

In Genesis 16, clearly Sarai was trying to solve a faith dilemma she and Abram had. On the one hand, the Lord had prevented her—Abram’s only wife—from bearing children. On the other hand, the Lord promised that Abram would become a father. The problem was that they did not know how God would fulfill His promise.

This passage can help equip Christians to deal with times when we must choose to wait on God to reveal His plan and trust His timing. We must listen to God’s voice and wait on Him to take care of the details of our faith journey.