

God's Presence Changes Everything

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[0 : 00] Good evening everyone. Thanks to Alistair and the worship team for leading us so well in the first part of our service. Abraham was a great man, but he was a pretty lousy husband at times.

Now he's not the only one who's that. A lot of politicians, businessmen, church leaders even, are highly respected in many ways. And yet when it comes to being effective heads of their home, they often fail.

And I'm sure that is true of many of us, as well as looking further out. But Abraham certainly did make a mess of things at times. Twice he presented his wife Sarah, and I probably will say Sarah is just a force of habit.

Twice he presented his wife Sarah as being his sister, which was half true but wholly deceitful, and was only done to save his own skin with little thoughts of the consequences for her.

And the chapter we're looking at this evening, it seems to me that Abraham totally wimps out of taking a lead and of making sure that things are done properly in a very difficult situation.

[1 : 06] He passes all the responsibility on to Sarah and does very little himself. He fails in his duty as a husband. So that was, for me, as a man, as a husband, was one of the key lessons, challenges from this chapter.

But there's a great encouragement as well. Because if we come to the second part of the chapter, we see Abraham's mess, and we see God stepping in and resolving that mess.

So despite Abraham having gone really badly wrong along with Sarah, God steps in and he shows his compassion to the one who's been so badly hurt, to Hagar, and he brings his purposes about through her.

And it's a great reassurance that when I mess up, that God is still in control, God will still bring about his purposes. That if we are hurt by others and by their actions, God is still in control, and God can come and can resolve the situation and can speak to us as he did to Hagar.

So there's challenges, and not just for husbands, there are challenges, and I think there are encouragements in Genesis 16. And the big difference between the two parts of the chapter is that in the first part, in the family situation there, God is absent, or at least appears to be absent.

[2 : 28] There's no thought of Abraham coming to God or hearing from God. In the second part of the chapter, God is very much present and is seen to be at work, and that is when he is able to fulfil his purposes.

So we're going to look tonight in two sections at what happens when God is absent and what happens when God is present. So when God is absent, there is often faltering faith.

If you read commentaries on Genesis, almost all of them are really hard on Abraham at this point. That this was a huge crisis of faith for Abraham when he took things into his own hands rather than waiting for God's time and for God's provision.

Now I have to say I have a lot of sympathy for Abraham in this particular part of the chapter. When we first meet Abraham and Sarah, the first thing that's said about Sarah is that she was barren, she was childless.

So probably for quite a long time before then, Sarah hadn't been able to conceive a child. Ten years have gone past and still nothing has happened.

[3 : 44] Not terribly clear exactly the timescale between chapter 15 of Genesis, when God repeats his promise to Abraham, his covenant that Abraham would become a great nation and so on.

There's probably some time in Genesis 15 and 16, but there's ten years since God first called Abraham and probably a lot longer than that when Abraham and Sarah were married.

And all this time they've been longing for a child and it's never come. Now they do have God's promise. God has promised that he will make Abraham the father of the great nation.

But you can understand why they are having a difficult time and wondering what is happening. I think there are a number of mitigating factors as we think about Abraham's faltering faith, if that's what it is here.

First thing is that God had never promised Sarah a son. He promised Abraham a son, promised Abraham to become the father of nations. He hadn't explicitly said it would be through Sarah.

[4 : 48] That comes in the next chapter, in chapter 17. So it may be that Abraham and Sarah got to the point, and it appears that was the case, where they said, well, maybe Sarah isn't to be the mother.

They then come up with what might seem to us a strange and almost repugnant solution. That instead of Sarah being the mother, her slave girl, Sagar, would take her place and would bear Abraham's child.

Now I think we do have to look at that in the context and the culture of the time. This is something that would have been considered normal in those days. In fact, it was sometimes built into marriage contracts, into the marriage vows, if you like, that if the wife was unable to conceive, then the husband would have a child through a servant.

And it wasn't considered the way we would. Indeed, right through a large part of the Old Testament, monogamy was not necessarily the way, right up to David, it was not necessarily the way that people behaved and was not seen as being as wrong as we would now.

So Abraham and Sarah were doing what they thought was right and what they thought perhaps would produce the child. And they were trying to cling on to God's promise, but at the same time to try and bring things about by themselves.

[6 : 16] But still, I don't think we can totally exonerate them. Because surely Abraham must have thought, God is not going to go for second best.

The best thing would be if Sarah was able to bear me a son, why would God go for second best? Even if, as is probably the case, Sarah was well beyond the age when, in natural terms, she could have borne Abraham a son.

I think also as we look at what Sarah says, it is very much about herself and her being childless rather than about God's promise being fulfilled. And Abraham, as the husband perhaps at that point, should have stepped in and said, let's take it to the Lord, let's see what God has to say about this.

If we look at the thing that is probably closest to a New Testament commentary on this instance, the book of Galatians, where Paul talks about Ishmael as the child of the flesh and Isaac as the child, the son of promise.

Now that may be largely a reference to the miraculous and normal nature of their births. Also perhaps, though, a reference to the fact that the way it came about, it was the flesh that led to Abraham and Sarah acting as they did, and God's promise was brought about through Isaac.

[7 : 36] So I'm trying to be kind to Abraham, but I don't think there's any doubt there is a bit of a faltering of faith here. But it is in circumstances where in many ways it is understandable, and as we look at ourselves, perhaps we would think, well, in that kind of circumstance, would I have acted any different?

One of the things that really comes across to me as we look at the beginning of this chapter is I think there's a lot of sympathy in the way the passage is written for the predicament that Abraham and Sarah find themselves in.

This is not harsh and judgmental. It is recognizing a human problem, a human issue, and rightly or wrongly, Abraham and Sarah try to address that issue.

Now we can extend that. There are many people who go through very difficult circumstances in their Christian lives. Some of them similar to what we're thinking about, people who month after month are hoping for children and they never seem to come.

But there are lots of others as well. There are people who have illnesses or have relatives who are very ill and they're praying for an element of recovery month after month after month.

[8 : 50] They pray and nothing seems to happen. Or there are people who have family situations which cause them great distress. Perhaps children who have wandered away from the Lord Jesus, perhaps never come to have faith in him.

And you pray and you pray and you pray and you think, what must I do? And it becomes really, really distressing for you. Or people who don't have a job and are looking and applying again and again.

It never seems to happen for them. And they're wondering, what is happening here? What is God doing? What should I do? Now these aren't hypothetical examples. The three I've just mentioned are very live for people in our church here at this point.

And a lot of us go through these kinds of heartaches that Abraham and Sarah went through and it is a real test of our faith. And perhaps we're wondering, what should I do?

What more can I do? Now Abraham and Sarah perhaps took the absence of the child as being guidance from God that they should do something different.

[9 : 57] And very often that is one of the ways in which God guides us. He guides us as we pray. He guides us through scripture. He also guides us through circumstances. But we need to be careful, as Abraham and Sarah should have been careful, as we look at circumstances to say, well, what is it really that God is saying here?

And make sure we don't misinterpret. And one thing that is often helpful to do is to find a mature Christian, someone we respect and someone whose judgment we trust and to talk to them about our situation.

So if tonight you're facing a heartache of any kind and it may be similar to Abraham and Sarah, it may not be, and then look to God for his help. Keep trusting in him that he will bring his purposes about.

But also look for his guidance. I think what is it God might want me to do? Is his will for me that I should wait and wait for him to bring about the fulfillment?

Or is he calling me to do something? And if we're unsure, good to talk to someone else and to pray through it with them. When faith is faltering, we've got to hang on to the fact that we have a good God who cares for us and who will bring out the best for us and look to him for our guidance.

[11 : 17] Now, it's slightly kind, I think, to Abraham in that part of this passage. I'm not going to be as kind to him in the next section. I've called it fragile families. So you have the situation.

Sarah has suggested to Abraham that he could have the child through Hagar. Abraham goes in, she becomes pregnant, and then perhaps not surprisingly, Hagar begins to look down on Sarah.

Being able to have a child was such a big thing for women in those days, that if you weren't able to conceive, it was seen as a great shame and something which in some way would make you seem lesser and perhaps not deserving of God's favor.

So Hagar looks down on Sarah and probably quite disrespectful in the way that she deals with her, and Sarah comes to Abraham. Now, she begins by blaming Abraham for the situation, which is a little unfair, when she was the one who had instigated it, but he should have taken responsibility too.

But he says, may the Lord judge, she says, may the Lord judge between you and me. And Abraham then has the opportunity as the husband, as the one who's supposed to be a leader in the family, to look at the situation, possibly to bring the two women together, and to try with God's help to seek a resolution.

[12 : 38] And what does he do? He says to Sarah, okay dear, you do whatever you want, I'm not getting involved in this. He totally absolves himself of his responsibility for it.

He avoids getting in the situation of conflict. Now, conflict's difficult. When I was in secular employment, we used to fairly regularly be asked to do psychometric tests.

So you ask lots of questions, and depending on how you answered them, they'd tell you how good you were, how bad you were in leadership. One I particularly remember was one where they were comparing us against a benchmarking group of leaders.

Now, my results were so bad, I managed to convince myself that they were trying to compare middle managers against chief executive, and I thought that was quite unfair. But the one result I particularly remember from that was they had one of the sections about avoiding conflict.

And I was off the scale with it, that I would totally avoid all kinds of conflict. Now, those who know me well will testify that it's probably got a grain of truth and it perhaps exaggerated slightly.

[13 : 49] I'm someone who doesn't readily take to conflict and doesn't certainly seek it. Now, other people have different ways of dealing with conflict. Some people seem to quite enjoy it and it invigorates them, and in a strange kind of way, they welcome it.

Other people take it very personally and feel there is any kind of conflict. There's a personal slur on them and they get very offended by it. And all three of these are bad ways of dealing with it.

But in our lives, if we're in leadership situations, or even if we're not, there are going to be times when we're faced with conflict and we need to be able to resolve it and to resolve it well.

And it's very difficult, it needs an awful lot of grace, it needs a lot of dependence on the Lord, but we need to be able to deal with conflict and to produce good outcomes from it.

And that's what Abraham totally fails to do. He totally fails in his duties as a husband. Now, at this point, Abraham is a husband to two wives. We mustn't forget that, Sarah and Hagar.

[14 : 52] Hagar clearly, he fails as she is bullied by Sarah and then has to run away. Sarah, he fails too because he doesn't provide the kind of leadership she might reasonably have expected in a very emotional situation.

He should have been the one who was calm and was able to take control of things. Now, being a husband in these kind of situations, particularly with two wives, fortunately, none of us have to do that, but being a husband can at times be difficult as we would seek to take the lead and perhaps be very difficult for us.

Fortunately, the Bible has told us how we should act as husbands. And it's put quite simply, we should love our wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.

Now, Abraham significantly fails to do that with Hagar. He doesn't love her enough to even be able to keep her as part of the family. He also fails in it with Sarah because he doesn't show real love in being able to help her to work through the difficulties that she has.

Interesting, the passage in Ephesians 5, we usually kind of stop in our thinking, well, I've stopped there. But the following verse is about Christ being able to present the church as pure and blameless to himself.

[16 : 10] That is achieved ultimately through the cross at Calvary, but also, I think, as part of an ongoing process as Christ would work with the church and would help us to grow more like him.

If we look at the literature of churches in Revelation, where the Lord Jesus is directly addressing a number of churches, he doesn't shy away from the difficult conversations there. He can tell them they've lost their first love or that they need to wake up or that they're lukewarm and they're only fed to be spewed out of his mouth.

Hard words, but necessary words and showing real love and concern for them. So if you're a husband like me, if you're a leader in any kind of situation, or just if you're in a situation and you can see the things are going wrong and there's something you can do about it, don't shy away from conflict.

Just go into it in a prayerful attitude and with a desire that God's will may be done and that there may be a real love for all those who are involved in it and that they may benefit from God's presence and God's guidance in the situation.

So faltering faith, fragile families. That's what happens when God is absent. What then happens when God is present?

[17 : 35] Now God is very much present in the second half of this chapter. He is present through someone who's called the angel of the Lord. And many people, as they look at descriptions of the angel of the Lord in the Old Testament, they look at it and they see that is a pre-incarnation appearance of the Lord Jesus, what's called a Christophany.

So it's the Lord Jesus himself coming into a situation and dealing with it. Now the argument from Genesis 16, I say there are lots of other passages. Genesis 16, clearly at the end of the passage, Hagar believes that she has seen God.

I have seen the one who sees me. Now God the Father never appears in human form. God the Spirit never appears in human form. The only member of the Trinity who comes in human form is the Lord Jesus.

And so many people believe that this was the Lord Jesus coming to appear to Hagar. There is a different view which says that very often in that time that you sent an emissary, someone to give a message to someone, then they spoke as if they were you and they received the same kind of respect that you would receive.

So they would say the angel of the Lord isn't necessarily an appearance of the Lord Jesus. I find the description that Alec Mottier gave was quite helpful.

[19 : 03] He said that this is a chief preview, a chief Old Testament preview of the second person of the Trinity. Whether we believe it is the Lord Jesus himself there, it is certainly God coming down to men and dealing with their issues and their problems.

So God is very much present in this part of the passage. And God does three things. Now we're sort of dealing in the reverse order of what we might think was logical, but we're dealing with them in the order that they're in the passage.

And the first thing is that God sends. So angel of the Lord comes and he finds Hagar near a spring in the desert. And he asks her, where are you come from and where are you going?

Hagar doesn't really answer the where are you going. It appears very likely she was trying to head back to Egypt. She was going that direction, likely to head back to Egypt where she came from.

Now she was a pregnant woman, alone going through the desert. So the prospects for getting to Egypt were never very good if God hadn't intervened, but that was probably the situation.

[20 : 11] And the angel says, go back, return to your mistress and submit to her. Now to really understand this, you need to understand that in verse nine, when the angel talks about Hagar submitting to Sarah, he uses the same verb that's used in verse six when it talks about Sarah ill-treating Hagar.

One is truly active and one is passive tense of the verb, but it is the same word. So the angel is effectively saying to Hagar, go back and allow Sarah to keep ill-treating you.

Now hopefully that didn't happen, but that is the thrust of what he's saying. Go back and submit to Sarah. Whatever she does to you, you need to accept. That must sound quite harsh and we'll look at the moment in a moment at what the angel says further to reassure her.

But he's not promising that Hagar will go back and everything will be fine and she'll be fully accepted and there will be no future problems. His command to her is to go back and to submit to Sarah even if she continues to be ill-treated by her.

I think for us, the lesson is God doesn't promise that our lives will be easy when he sends us out to serve him. He doesn't promise that everything will be roses and that people will accept us and that we'll be positively received by others and there will be no problems.

[21 : 43] On the contrary, the Lord Jesus tells his disciples, in this world you will have problems. But then he says, take heart because I have overcome the world.

I think that's the difference with Hagar. When she was alone with Abraham and Sarah and was being ill-treated, she felt the best thing she could do was to get out of that situation.

As she goes back now, she knows she's going back with God's instruction and that God will be with her and that he will give her the ability to cope with whatever may face her when she returns.

And we must take that kind of assurance too that when we go into the difficult situations where people might be opposed to us, if we go knowing that we're going in God's will and that he has called us to that, then we know that he will go with us and he will allow us to be able to take whatever the world may throw at us and to emerge victorious and to emerge with a real peace in him.

God sends her back, but he doesn't send her back alone. He sends her back with his reassurance of his presence. Second thing that happens is that God speaks.

[23 : 03] Now, like Alistair, I've got a bit of Hebrew and I suspect I know even less Hebrew than Alistair does, but I've got translations up there from others. So the angel sends Hagar back and he sends her back with a promise that she's going to have a son and that he is going to be giving her descendants that are too numerous to count.

Now, interesting, that very much reflects what God has already said to Abraham, that Abraham's descendants would be greater than the stars in the sky and the sands in the seashore and so on.

There's a real echo of that, even though ultimately Ishmael isn't the child of promise, there's an echo of what God said to Abraham. And I was especially, I think when you read in chapter 17, it's probably confirmed that when Hagar went back, Abraham took the words the angel had said to her as confirmation that Ishmael would be the child of promise.

That's why he was so surprised in chapter 17 when God says it would be Sarah and Abraham laughs at the thought that Sarah could possibly have a son. God makes this great promise to Hagar that the son she's going to bear, he's going to be the father of many, many descendants.

And he will be the one who forever will be testimony that God has heard her in her distress and God has acted on it. Now he then makes some prophecies about Ishmael, so we won't go into great detail, which are not so positive, as someone who's a bit of a loner, who is against others, and who will have, in many ways, quite a difficult life.

[24 : 48] And of course, that prophecy continues down to Ishmael's descendants. And the conflicts in the Middle East between Jews and Arabs are in many ways between the descendants of Isaac and the descendants of Ishmael.

But I think from the point of view of what we might take from it this evening, it is that God has heard Hagar. And as he sends her back, he gives her his promise and his commitment for the future that the son she is bearing will be the father of many people.

And then finally, God sees. And we have this El Roy, in appreciation may not be right, but the name that Hagar gives to God is the God who sees me.

I have now seen the one who sees me, she said. And I believe a slightly better translation is the God of sight, so it refers both to Hagar, sight of God and of God, seeing Hagar in her situation.

But the assurance here for Hagar is that all she's been through, all the difficulties she's experienced, they've not been hidden from God. She knows that God has seen and God has come and God has acted in that situation.

[26 : 10] And that must have been the thing that really comforted and reassured her and gave her a faith and a trust to go back to Abraham and to Sarah.

That her situation, for once she felt abandoned and alone and that no one was on her side. Yet God was there and God had seen everything that had happened.

And God, having seen what had happened, he had acted and he had worked things for her good. The one who was oppressed was not invisible to God.

He saw her and he came to her. And that's the God we have. A God who sees those who are in distress, those who have been unfairly treated, those who are going through the most difficult times and is able to come and to reassure and to help them.

And we know that, of course, because we have a God who saw us in our sin and who came to us in his son to pay the penalty for our sin and to bring us back to God.

[27 : 22] There's the old hymn, isn't there? It says, He saw me ruined in the fall, yet loved me notwithstanding all. He saved me from my lost estate, his loving kindness.

Oh, how great. We have a God who has seen us and has seen our fallen condition and has given us the opportunity through the Lord Jesus to be restored to him and to have our sins forgiven.

We have a God, too, who sees us in all our situations in life, in all the distress that we suffer, in all the circumstances that we find really, really difficult.

And as he sees us, he is there to help us and to bring about his purposes. As Paul said, he didn't spare his only son but gave him up for us.

And how much more will he not, along with him, freely give us all things? God sees us. God cares about the situations in our life.

[28 : 28] And God acts. And he brings about his purposes. And as we seek his help and his guidance, we can be confident that he knows what is best for us and that he will bring that about in our lives.

So as I said at the start, it's a chapter which has challenged me and it's also greatly encouraged me. The challenge is there about our faith and about our willingness to deal with situations that arise and to deal with them in God's way rather than our own.

As a husband or as a leader or as someone with responsibilities to take on these responsibilities and in love and in care for others to be willing to take the responsibility God gives to us at where necessary to deal with situations of conflict in a loving and gracious way.

when we are struggling to see God's will and struggling to see how the thing that has been such a problem for us for so long could ever be resolved, God asks us to keep trusting in him and to keep our faith strong and not to falter.

And we have the assurance that God is with us. He is with us particularly in our day through his Holy Spirit who is with us as our guide, as our comforter, as our counsellor. and God sees our situation.

[29 : 55] God can speak to us through his word, through prayer as we are aware of his voice speaking to us, through others as we seek their help. And sometimes God sends us out and he says this is what I want you to do and whatever happens, whatever circumstance you face, I'll be with you and I will protect you.

Let's take the God who sees, the God who speaks, the God who sends and let's go out this week with a confidence in him and a desire to really serve him and to live lives that are pleasing to him.

Let's pray together. Our Father, we thank you for your word and we thank you that your word challenges as well as encourages us. We pray that you will help us to be people who have a real love for one another and that that love won't just be warm feelings or pliant handshakes but it will be a real concern and a real willingness to help each other through the difficult situations and to tackle issues as they might arise.

We thank you too that you are a God who sees us in our distress and in our difficulty and who is able and willing to be there for us. And we do pray for a very large number of people in our church fellowship here who are going through very difficult situations where they may be finding it very difficult to see your will or how good can come out of it.

And we too pray that you will help them to retain a strong faith in you to have a dependence on you and a knowledge that you do work things for our best and that you do care about every situation in our lives.

[31 : 41] We thank you for our time together this evening. We thank you for your word. We thank you for our worship we were able to bring you earlier and we commit ourselves to you now in the name of the Lord Jesus.

Amen.