

ABRAHAM: ONE NOMAD'S AMAZING JOURNEY OF FAITH

Running ahead of God

Genesis 16:1–8, 11–12, 15–16



LET'S BEGIN HERE

The impatience of our flesh tends to eclipse the work of the Spirit. When God says, *Wait*, our flesh blurts out, *Now!* This tension creates the perfect condition for believers to run ahead of God. We know God has a plan, but we struggle with adhering to His timing. Instead of waiting on Him, we take matters into our own hands. And invariably, we regret it.

Genesis 16 records a classic example of running ahead of God. Both Abraham and Sarah, who were still known as Abram and Sarai at the time, should have known better. However, in an impatient moment, fueled by the flesh, they devised a scheme to “help” God fulfill His promises. Through their folly, we learn that when we try to help or hurry God, we can make a mess of things. But, thankfully, God in His grace sees us in our distress. Our patient Father helps His impatient children pick up the pieces and guides us back to His plan.



YOUR TURN IN THE SCRIPTURES

Open your Bible and read Genesis 16 to get the flow of the story. If you wish, read the chapter aloud to better focus your mind. Pray as you begin, asking the Lord to reveal His truth as you open your heart to Him.



Observation: Entering the Scenes

Now that you have a wide-angle view of the passage, read Genesis 16 again, and this time use your senses to see the characters, hear their conversations, and feel the tension. “As we learn to engage our senses,” writes Chuck Swindoll in his book, *Searching the Scriptures*, “the verses come alive in our minds . . . and ultimately in our lives!”¹

Imagine Abraham’s nomadic herdsman lifestyle in Palestine four thousand years ago. Abraham and Sarah resided in a tent, cooked over an open fire, hauled water from a stream or well, and lived off the land. As wealthy people, they hired workers and had servants do the labor. But when facing a medical problem such as infertility, they had no clinics or doctors to go to.

Quotable

Of all of life's dilemmas, none are worse than the spiritual dilemmas. Do we keep waiting on God to work or do we move ahead?

— Charles R. Swindoll



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At this point in their lives, Abraham was in his 80s and Sarah in her 70s, and they still had no children! God had given them hope of offspring but not the reality yet. Can you identify with Abraham and Sarah's feelings of anxiety and impatience? As you read Genesis 16, find Abraham and Sarah's *predicament*, *dilemma*, *rationalization*, and the *consequences* that resulted from their actions.

- *Predicament*: a difficult, perplexing, or trying situation
- *Dilemma*: a problem involving a difficult choice
- *Rationalization*: a self-satisfying but incorrect reason for one's behavior
- *Consequence*: something produced by a cause

What was the predicament?

What was the dilemma?

What was the rationalization?



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What were the consequences?

Wrap up your observations of the passage by taking note of God's response to Abraham and Sarah's fleshly scheme. Write down the qualities you see in God as He related to the individuals in this account. Do you see a contrast between Sarah's harshness toward Hagar and God's compassion?



Interpretation: Understanding the Meaning

Now let's seek to interpret the meaning. What was Moses' purpose in including this episode in his book? What was he teaching his readers about faith, family, and walking with God? To answer these questions, let's examine the chapter in four parts, beginning with Abraham and Sarah's scheme.



Searching the Scriptures Tools

Just as we need tools in the kitchen to help us cook our meals, we need Bible study tools to help us feed ourselves God's Word. The tools we recommend for studying Abraham's life are a Bible dictionary, such as *The New Unger's Bible Dictionary*, and a commentary, such as *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*. Versions of the Bible are available at BibleGateway.com, and an excellent online Bible commentary by Thomas L. Constable is at lumina.bible.org.



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A Scheme of Human Origin—Genesis 16:1–4

To understand Sarah's seemingly odd offer to Abraham—that he bear a child with Sarah's handmaid, Hagar—we must examine the cultural background of the day. Read the section on Genesis 16 in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*. For an online resource, go to lumina.bible.org. At this site, find Genesis 16, select Constable's Notes on the right panel, and read his explanation.

What insight do you glean from the cultural background?

Although the “committee on morality” of Sarah's day would have stamped *approved* on her surrogate-mother plan and the highbrow society ladies would have nodded in support, God disapproved. What was wrong with Sarah and Abraham taking initiative?

What lessons was Moses teaching the newly formed Hebrew nation about letting culture guide moral decisions rather than God and taking control versus trusting God?



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Consequences and Conflict—Genesis 16:4–6

In his description of the scene, Moses parallels the account of Abraham and Sarah's sin with the sin of Adam and Eve. Compare the conflicts in Genesis 16:4–6 and Genesis 3:1–19, and write down any similarities.

Both couples doubted what God told them. They doubted His goodness. And in both cases, their sin ignited discord. The tragic scene worsened when Abraham abandoned Hagar and told Sarah, “Deal with her as you see fit” (Genesis 16:6). Unleashed, Sarah dumped on Hagar all the years of shame and ridicule she had suffered because of her infertility and released the full force of her pent-up pain. In her blind rage, Sarah abused the surrogate mother of the baby she had wanted to be her own. When Hagar could take no more, “she finally ran away” (16:6).

This raw depiction of family violence in the home of one of the Bible's greatest heroes illustrates vital lessons for families in Moses' day. What were these lessons for the Hebrews . . . and us?

God's Mercy and Grace—Genesis 16:7–14

Thankfully, God intervened. “In verses 7 through 14, we have the first account of God's dealing with an abused woman,” notes Chuck Swindoll in his sermon. The angel of the Lord found Hagar “along the road to Shur”—the wilderness boundary east of Egypt, Hagar's homeland (Genesis 16:7). Gently, the angel of the Lord asked her questions (16:8), advised her to return (16:9), and relayed to her divine promises and comfort (16:10–11).



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For victims of abuse and abandoned mothers like Hagar, what is the significance of Ishmael's name, "God hears," (Genesis 16:11) and Hagar's name for the Lord, "the God who sees me" (16:13)?

Humankind's Inescapable Reminder of Carnality — Genesis 16:15–16

Hagar returned to Abraham and Sarah under the protection of God's promise, and she gave birth to Ishmael, Abraham's son (Genesis 16:15). As the angel of the Lord foretold, the conflict in Abraham's home would weave itself into the fabric of Ishmael's personality and, ultimately, his offspring: "he will live in open hostility against all his relatives" (16:12).

Ishmael became the father of the Arab nations through his twelve sons (25:12–18). Given what you know about the Middle East, how has the angel's prophecy played out through the centuries?

Reminiscent of the deadly rivalry between Cain and Abel would be the long-lived hostility between Ishmael and his yet-to-be-born half-brother, Isaac, and their descendants. The Arab-Israeli conflict is a sober reminder of the consequences of sin. So the next time we're tempted to run ahead of God, we should . . . **WAIT!**

Application: The Next Time We're Tempted to Run ahead of God

Walk a little slower. When faced with family-altering decisions, we should do what Abraham and Sarah did not do. We must slow down until we can think things through. Hasty decisions are rarely good decisions. Pray about the solutions, and seek the Lord's will.



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Ask God for patience. As we said earlier, the impatience of the flesh will eclipse the work of the Spirit. True patience, a fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22), comes only from God. He will give us patience when we ask . . . and peace as we wait.

Imagine the worst-case scenario. Just as Eve saw the delicious fruit, Sarah pictured a baby cooing in her arms. However, like we all do at times, Sarah and Abraham turned a blind eye to the warning flags signaling conflict ahead. Humans are a creative bunch—we can justify *any* sin to get what we want. Be realistic about consequences!

Think about how others will be impacted. Our sin can damage loved ones who had nothing to do with our choice. Consider the innocent victims who get run over when we run ahead of God.

Here is some space for you to follow the steps in the acronym **WAIT**. Take your time as you wait on the Lord for His guidance.

Thankfully, God's grace was as present in Abraham and Sarah's story as was their presumption. If you've recklessly barged ahead of God and need to repair some damage, welcome the Father's compassion as Abraham and Sarah welcomed Hagar back into their home. He will help you mend relationships and restore peace. Pray to Him now.



A FINAL PRAYER

Father, teach me patience. You have a plan, and I have a need. Help me adjust my pace to Yours. Grant me restraint and a willingness to wait. And fill my anxious soul with confidence that, as I wait, You are present, working deep within me and my circumstances. Thank You for Your peace and healing in my heart and in my home. Amen.

ENDNOTE

1. Charles R. Swindoll, *Searching the Scriptures: Find the Nourishment Your Soul Needs* (Carol Stream, Ill.: Tyndale House, 2016), 94.



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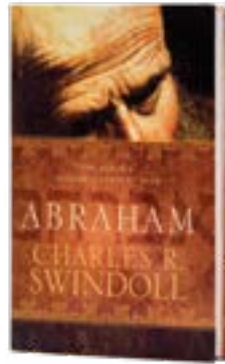
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For the 2017–2018 broadcasts, this *Searching the Scriptures* study was developed by Bryce Klabunde, executive vice president of Searching the Scriptures Ministries, based upon the original outlines, charts, and sermon transcripts of Charles R. Swindoll's messages.



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