

The Good Book

Understanding the Bible

Reading - Genesis 16:1-16

¹ Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. But she had an Egyptian slave named Hagar; ² so she said to Abram, "The Lord has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my slave; perhaps I can build a family through her."

Abram agreed to what Sarai said. ³ So after Abram had been living in Canaan ten years, Sarai his wife took her Egyptian slave Hagar and gave her to her husband to be his wife. ⁴ He slept with Hagar, and she conceived.

When she knew she was pregnant, she began to despise her mistress. ⁵ Then Sarai said to Abram, "You are responsible for the wrong I am suffering. I put my slave in your arms, and now that she knows she is pregnant, she despises me. May the Lord judge between you and me."

⁶ "Your slave is in your hands," Abram said. "Do with her whatever you think best." Then Sarai mistreated Hagar; so she fled from her.

⁷ The angel of the Lord found Hagar near a spring in the desert; it was the spring that is beside the road to Shur. ⁸ And he said, "Hagar, slave of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going?"

"I'm running away from my mistress Sarai," she answered.

⁹ Then the angel of the Lord told her, "Go back to your mistress and submit to her." ¹⁰ The angel added, "I will increase your descendants so much that they will be too numerous to count."

¹¹ The angel of the Lord also said to her: "You are now pregnant and you will give birth to a son. You shall name him Ishmael, for the Lord has heard of your misery.

¹² He will be a wild donkey of a man; his hand will be against everyone and everyone's hand against him and he will live in hostility toward all his brothers."

¹³ She gave this name to the Lord who spoke to her: "You are the God who sees me," for she said, "I have now seen the One who sees me." ¹⁴ That is why the well was called Beer Lahai Roi; it is still there, between Kadesh and Bered.

¹⁵ So Hagar bore Abram a son, and Abram gave the name Ishmael to the son she had borne.

¹⁶ Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore him Ishmael.

Reading - Isaiah 55:1-9

¹ "Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. ² Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and you will delight in the richest of fare. ³ Give ear and come to me listen, that you may live. I will make an everlasting covenant with you, my faithful love promised to David. ⁴ See, I have made him a witness to the peoples, a ruler and commander of the peoples. ⁵ Surely you will summon nations you know not, and nations you do not know will come running to you, because of the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has endowed you with splendour." ⁶ Seek the Lord while he may be found; call on him while he is near. ⁷ Let the wicked forsake their ways and the unrighteous their thoughts. Let them turn to the Lord, and he will have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will freely pardon. ⁸ "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the Lord. ⁹ "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."

A brief recap of mornings teaching

It can be hard to understand the bible! What did we think of when we read the story in Genesis 16, where Sarai instructs her husband to go and sleep with her servant.... what's that about? What about verse 12, where the angel speaks of a yet to born child as a wild donkey living in hostility towards all his brothers? It's sometimes hard to understand these texts. The bible though has not been given to us as something that you need a Phd to understand, this is a book that can be understood by anyone, even a child. God wants us to understand it - it's not a puzzle to be solved.

It can be easier when we understand the wider picture of the story of the bible. Steve encouraged us to look at the YOBL web page and listen back to the 'Bible an hour session' to help us look at the whole story of the bible. Some parts of scripture help us to understand other parts of scripture - knowing the wider story is important. It can also be a challenge in understanding how to live it out the teaching of scripture once we understand what it is saying.

Some top tips for understanding the bible:

- What did it mean when it was originally written? Think about the people who it was written to, what did it mean to them? Think about this before we think about what it means for us.
- It can be helpful to have a commentary or study bible to help us do this (biblehub.com and esv.org are great free online resources)
- Some of our Old Testament scriptures are quoted in the New Testament and this can give us a new meaning for a passage (verse 1 of Isaiah 55 is quoted in John 7:37 by Jesus) - a study bible will give you references of where else passages are quoted.
- Read the bible with others. Join a home group or find some running mates
- Engage with scripture in a different way - try meditating on it, praying through it, you could even use a scripture colouring book, and see how Gods word can come alive in your heart.

Are you in? This story is your story. God wants us to play our part in his story of seeing his plan for salvation accomplished upon the earth and in the lives of those around us.

Questions for discussion

Read the passages aloud - what strikes you from these readings? What things from the passages immediately come to mind about what it means to live as a disciple of Jesus?

Do you have any top tips you would like to add to the list above?

Steve encouraged us this week to think about Genesis 16, use the questions below to help study this passage together.

Introduction to Genesis 16

Chapter 15 is the model of faith in the Old Testament (v6, "Abram believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.") and God's covenant to bring about all the promises he made to Abram and his offspring. Chapter 15 will help bring our passage this week into even clearer focus - read this quickly now.

Genesis 16 contains an important contrast between man's tendency to choose his own, sinful way and God's steadfastness. To be fair to Abram and Sarai, there have been decades filled with drama between God's great promise and their present circumstances. They had seen God's faithfulness and protection, but they had not seen any progress toward realising God's specific promise to them. So they take matters into their own hands, which never goes well for them, or us.

'God hears and sees and will fulfill his promise to bless every nation.'

Abram and Sarai try to make God's promise come on their own by having Abram sleep with someone who was not his wife. The results are predictable; this scenario leads directly to jealousy, anger, marital tension, and relational strife. For those of you wondering if God seemed to condone

polygamy because it happened so often a lot of Old Testament stories, you only need to look here to see if the Bible thinks it is a good idea (it doesn't).

This story is one of several ways that Abram and Sarai got nervous and doubted God's promise. Time after time, God patiently reiterates his promise, and when they show faith, God counts them as righteousness (Gen. 15:6). God shows his faithfulness to his promise in one surprising and amazing way, in chapter 16. God sought after Hagar, comforted her, and promised that her child would become a nation as well! In this story, we see God's incredible care for the lonely and downtrodden.

Many Middle-Eastern peoples claim Ishmael (Hagar's son) as their heir. God's promise to Ishmael's mother came true! But making him into a nation is not the end of God's work in their lives. The ultimate promise from Genesis 12:1-3 is that all nations will be blessed through Abraham's seed. The New Testament writers declare that Jesus is that seed through whom all nations will be blessed. God's promise is to extend the same blessings of Christ to every people in the world.

Bible Study Questions:

- 1) Look back at Genesis 16. Who are the main characters in this passage? List out all the actions each one takes and say if it pointed to faith or lack of faith in God.
- 2) Read Genesis 16:7-16 again. What do you notice about how God intervenes?
- 3) Why is it important in this passage (and to you personally) that God is a "God of seeing" and one who hears?
- 4) Thinking about Hagar's situation in this passage, how does she teach us to interact with injustice in our society?

Group Application Questions:

- 5) Genesis 15:6 says that Abram believed God's promises and it was credited to him as righteousness. Later, we see Abram and Sarai acting in a way that does not show trust in God's promises. What are some of God's promises that you believe yet are not acting on or living in accordance with right now?
- 6) At some point in our lives, all of us have taken something into our own hands and the consequences were more troublesome than the turmoil of waiting on God. What do you need to trust God with? How can our group help hold you accountable and encourage you in your faith?

Things to pray for:

Prayer points for church taken from our prayer diary;

- Ann Fursdon - Give thanks for a visit home to see my Mum and other family members, friends and supporters in December. Give thanks for a good month in my new place of work in November; contacts have been made and work has started with the mentally ill in the area. Pray that I can move nearer to my place of work.
- FISH - Give thanks for all the new students we have had contact with. Pray for the appointment of a student worker.
- Those working for the Diocese of Peterborough and the cathedral