

JOURNEY

FOLLOWING IN THE FAITHSTEPS OF ABRAHAM



STEP 6: KNOW WHO KNOWS BEST

Have you ever tried to explain an idea or concept to someone who thought they knew better or thought they had a grasp of it, but quite obviously didn't? Or have you ever been the other person? (I don't expect you to admit to it!)

That's the situation in today's story, where everyone thinks they know best – but only one person actually does!

Genesis 16

I've said that this series is all about Abram's faith-journey. But his story overlaps with others, too – in this instance, Sarai and Hagar's. And in this chapter, we find all 3 making decisions which at the time might have seemed for the best. So much so that we might even sympathise!

So, for a few minutes, let's do that. Each third of the room, you get to represent the main characters in this chapter.

How might you defend their actions?

Argue their case?

Abram. Poor Abram: he's trying to work out how God is going to fulfil this 'promise of a son.' Plus he's been waiting for 85 years (10 years since God first spoke those words). And, of course, he has a desperate wife to make happy, too (though the whole Abram-Hagar idea was admittedly hers – something Abram decides *not* to mention)!

Sarai. Poor Sarai: she's a heartbroken woman – her hopes raised by the promise of a son, then dashed. So she opts for what was a common cultural practice 4000 years ago: she hands her Egyptian maidservant over to her husband, to be his concubine. Which seems like a plan until Hagar becomes pregnant and looks a bit too happy about it.

Hagar. Poor Hagar: she's young, probably late teens (with no parents around), and she's helpless (how can she possibly say no to this?). When she falls pregnant, at last she has some kind of leverage – and like many expectant mums, she's overjoyed. But then she begins to suffer abuse from her mistress – and so, of course, she runs.

OK, who has the strongest case here? Most of us would probably argue Hagar – and the fact that God speaks to her directly suggests He might agree. But even so, they all get things wrong, because they're all responding to this situation out of feelings rather than faith; disobedience rather than dependence. They all think they know better than God does!

Which brings us to the one character we haven't yet considered. What is *God's* case for saying, "I know best"? We get an idea from this 'messenger of *Yahveh*', a physical manifestation of God.

In a question, command, promise:

1) Question: "Where have you come from, Hagar? And where are you going?"

Now why does God even ask this question? Surely He already knows the answer – doesn't He?

He asks because Hagar needs to know. Hagar needs to acknowledge her own mishandling of the situation – the fact that she was perhaps not as sympathetic towards Sarai as she could or should have been. But she also needs to acknowledge something else: that she doesn't know the answer to the second half of the question! Why? Because only God can see the future, and unless we're willing to entrust ourselves into His hands, like Hagar we won't have a clue. It's the reason most people live rushing from one activity to another, or one car-crash to another.

They don't want to face the "where are you going?" question!

2) Command: "Go back to your mistress and submit," God says next.

Now this might sound a harsh thing to ask of her – and it is. And ordinarily-speaking, no-one should ever be forced to go back to an abusive relationship (so if you're wondering what our church policy is on this, there you have it). But given Hagar's circumstances in this passage, it kind of makes sense. Hagar had run away without an exit-strategy, and the chances of her surviving, on her own, would have been as remote as the desert she was in at that moment. So, God tells her to go back.

There will be times when God commands us to do things that are difficult, that we simply don't feel like doing; things that require tremendous courage and faith. In fact, in the eyes of the world, that's basically Christianity!

When He does, we need to remember: He is King, not us. But also, that He has our best interests at heart.

3) Promise: "I will so increase your descendants," God says, "and you shall bear a son, and name him Ishmael ('God has heard')."

I.e. God wants to bless us – but there's a warning here, too. What's fascinating is that, some 2600 years later, a merchant named Muhammad, from the Arabian *Quraysh* tribe, claimed a lineage going all the way back to Ishmael, and kickstarted a religion which – all due respect to its followers – is built on the idea of earning your way to heaven rather than trusting in God's grace.

And just as God warns, there has been animosity between Ishmael's children and Isaac's children, ever since.

What's the point? That when you obey God, there are consequences. And when you disobey God, there are consequences. Even when you're an Abram, or a Sarai.

God Sees It All

How does Hagar respond to all this? She refers to God as *El-Ro'i*, literally, 'the God who sees me,' and even names the place after the experience: *Beer L'Chai Ro'i*, 'the Well of the Living One, who sees me.'

But what does that mean? It means ...

- **God understands our reasons.** He sees through the masks, the smokescreens, and the behaviours, to what's going on behind the scenes: to the hurts, the fears, and the frustrations that can cause us to go our own way, do our own thing, and think we know best. He knows.
- **God understands His reasons.** For the rules that He gives us, for asking us to trust and obey, for saying "I know best." God knows what He's doing, because unlike us, He can see the results of a life lived with us in control! And a life lived with Him in control, too. He knows.

Thinking we know better than God can come in all shapes and sizes. It might be in this relationship, in this lifestyle choice, in what we choose to identify as, in our sense of priorities, in our responses to others, even our commitment to Him. Whatever it looks like ... we all do it!

And God understands our reasons – but He also understands His. Which will you trust more?

Or as Proverbs 3:5-6 puts it:

*"Trust in the LORD with all your heart,
and lean not on your own understanding;
in all your ways acknowledge Him,
and He will make your paths straight."*