

When it feels like God's promises are under threat

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[0 : 00] So I don't know what the most high-pressure situation you've been in has been, but I really feel for kickers in Rugby World Cup finals.

Andre Pollard and all of those guys who there are times, especially in the finals, which you don't see many tries being scored, where it's all down to the skill of the kicker, of the team.

And all the pressure for certain moments when they're lining up to take that kick. Millions of people are watching that one person and pinning all their hopes and dreams on his performance.

That's a pretty high-pressure situation, right? It's a situation I would not like to be in. Well, I think it's not too different also to how Abram's wife Sarai would have felt by the end of Genesis 15.

If you've been following the story so far, you'll know why. Now remember, as we've been working through Genesis, God made these great promises to Abram. Amazing promises on which the whole rest of the Bible is based.

[1 : 08] And his promises were to give him a great big family, through which in the future, God is going to achieve the undoing of the curse in this world.

You couldn't get bigger promises than that. And through this family, God is going to bring life and blessing back into this broken world of death.

Epic promises. However, all of that happening depends on Abram's wife Sarai and her ability to fall pregnant here in this story.

And that's a pretty high-pressure situation, isn't it? Everybody pinning their hopes on her performance. And what's more, at the beginning of chapter 16 here, we discover it's the very thing she is unable to do because she's infertile.

I mean, she had one job in the story of salvation, and that is to have a kid. And that's the one thing she couldn't do. Now you can imagine how she felt guilty, right?

[2 : 09] She must have. She must have felt like a failure, not only to her husband, but to God. And so this story in Genesis 16, it's a very important story because it's, first of all, the story of how she tries to fix that problem.

But it's also a story about how God does what he promised to do, even when the curse seems to threaten those promises. And that's what we're going to learn about as we look at this story.

Because that is what's happening here. This is not just a story about Sarai and her problem. It's a story about what happens when the curse and the brokenness of this world comes up against the promises of God and calls those promises into question.

So up until now in the story of Genesis, well, since chapter 12, we've been exposed to these great promises of God. But the question is, well, what happens when those promises seem that they're falling apart?

They seem that they're failing. How are we going to respond to that? Well, that's what the story is about. And it happens that the very thing in the story that is throwing a spanner in the works of God's plan to undo the curse in this world is, in fact, the curse itself.

[3 : 20] That's what's stopping, seeming to stop the undoing of the curse. So let me explain what I mean. If you remember back in Genesis 12, it was a few weeks ago now, right after God gave Abram the promise of land.

Remember, because he gave him this great promise at the beginning of chapter 12 and then halfway through chapter 12, he promises him this land, Canaan, that you're standing in now. You will own this land. You will have this land. This will be the land of promise where your family will live. Great promise. But right after, a few verses after, God gives this promise of land to Abram, what happens? You remember?

Famine hits the land. The land fails to do what the land should do. The curse of the ground made it impossible for Abram to benefit from God's promise that he just gave him in chapter 12.

Well, now, same kind of thing is happening. Just after God gives Abram the promise of children in Genesis 15, what happens?

[4 : 20] The curse of the womb and the difficulty in bearing children threatens that promise. Do you see what's happening here? If you know Genesis and you remember back to Genesis 3, you'll pick something up.

That when humans were cursed because of their sin, because of them turning their back on God's authority and wanting to call the shots themselves, back in Genesis 3, God cursed humans and he gave men a curse and he gave women a curse.

Do you remember what it was? Men was the ground. The cursed ground. Women was childbearing. Difficulty in childbearing. And so these things become the very two things that threaten God's plan to break the curse in the chapters that follow.

Do you see that? The curse is the thing that's threatening God's promises to undo the curse. And so not only is Sarai's place in God's plan as an individual called into question here, but the plan itself, the whole plan to undo the curse is called into question in the story.

Sarai's thinking, you know, is God really going to do this? Because it doesn't look like it from where I'm standing. Well, let me tell you, there are many times in a Christian's life where we're going to find ourselves in Sarai's position.

[5 : 39] When God's promises to us are called into question by the effects of the curse in our lives. Sickness and death and tragedy or whatever your particular experience of the curse is, because you can't escape that.

We all will experience the curse in this life because it is an effective curse. We will all experience the results of this broken world in different ways and to different degrees, but none of us can escape that in this life.

And when we experience those aspects of the curse in our lives, well, you know what they do? They always tend to throw God's promises to us into question.

They always tend to throw into question in our minds God's plan for us. Will God actually do what he's promised to do for us, his covenant people?

Because often it doesn't look like it from where we're standing or where we're lying in that hospital bed or wherever it might be. And so you see how this story is actually very relevant to us.

[6 : 46] Just as God's promises were called into question in Sarai's mind because of her experience of the curse, that will happen for us as well. I'm sure it has already in your life as a Christian.

And so we've got to look at how Sarai responds and evaluate that response in this story. How does she respond to her doubts? Well, turns out she decides to take matters into her own hands.

No more waiting on the men to sort things out. No, if you want it done properly, do it yourself. And so she makes a plan. If she can't have children the normal way, she'll use her handmaiden, Hagar, to do it for her.

So she organizes Abram to marry Hagar as his second wife and to have a baby with her. Now, let's just pause. That doesn't often happen in today's culture.

And so we've got to understand something about doing that, is that it wasn't a wrong thing to do in that time and in that culture. In fact, for many rich women who didn't want to go through the risk and labor of having children without, you know, modern medicine, it was quite a risky thing to do.

[7 : 56] They would often opt for having children through a surrogate instead. And also polygamy, one man having many wives, was not uncommon in that time and that culture.

Of course, it's certainly not ideal. And the Bible shows us it's not God's will for marriage. God's will is one man, one woman, exclusive for life.

But in the context of this story, what Sarai proposed here wasn't technically wrong or sinful. And so let's continue the story. What happens after that?

Well, Hagar falls pregnant. So mission accomplished. Yeah, well done, Sarai, for fixing the unfortunate situation that God had put you in. You're so clever. Except we read on and we discover the situation is not fixed.

In fact, it ends up being worse than it was at the beginning. So Hagar, because she could have children and Sarai couldn't. She starts looking down on Sarai, pushing her out of the picture.

[8 : 55] Now it's all about Abram and Hagar. They're going to be the promise. Sarai's just in the background. Seems like roles have reversed between Hagar and Sarai. A lot of tension between them. Now Sarai doesn't take kindly to this and retaliates and starts treating Hagar badly.

And then everything just snowballs and gets really ugly until Hagar decides, no, that's enough. She packs up and she leaves into the wilderness. And so that's kind of where this little narrative ends. And it ends off with not only Sarai not being able to have children, but now their only hope of having children has just left. And so it's a big mess when we get to this point in the story.

The household is torn apart and the promise of children and this great family is even less likely to be fulfilled than it was at the beginning of the story.

But that's when God shows up. From verse 7. Follow along with me in your Bibles. The angel of the Lord found Hagar.

[10 : 01] By the way, in this case, it turns out that it's actually the Lord himself. Sometimes when he comes in the form of an angel, or in visual form, he's referred to as the angel of the Lord.

And he brings a message to humans. Usually he uses his messages as angels. Sometimes he does it himself. And that's what's happening here. And where the angel of the Lord found Hagar near a spring in the desert, it was the spring that is beside the road to Shur.

But just an interesting note as well. Shur is in the southwest. So she's obviously on her way back to Egypt, where she comes from. Maybe find some of her extended family.

But that's just an interesting note because there's always a significance of Egypt being outside of the land. And anyway, we read on from verse 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. Then the angel of the Lord told her, go back to your mistress and submit to her. The angel added, I will increase your descendants so much that they will be too numerous to come.

[11 : 13] And then he gives some more details about this promise that he's making to her. But basically, what God is telling Hagar here is, as long as she's patient and submissive and trusts him, she and her son will have a good future.

And he will make sure of that. And so she does. She submits. She goes back. But it's actually interesting that God would do this at all for Sarai.

It's similar to back in the early chapters of Genesis where God came and helped Cain. Remember that? Put a mark on his forehead to protect him. And you're going, well, why? I mean, he's not even in the line of promise.

Why would God do that? It's a similar scenario here. Because Hagar is an Egyptian. She's on her way back to Egypt. And Ishmael, her son, doesn't turn out to be the child of promise anyway. So why would God do this? Spoiler alert, by the way. So Sarai does end up having a child by herself, Isaac, through which God continues his covenant. And so the fact that he even does all this for Hagar and her son is quite surprising here.

[12 : 21] And it highlights something about God to us. First of all, it just highlights how gracious he is. And how he has always got a heart for the downtrodden and those who have been treated unjustly.

He doesn't ignore them in this world. That's just an attribute of God that we're reminded of again in the story. But there's another thing that this highlights. And that is how powerful his promise to Abram actually is to have many children.

Just by merit of this child in Hagar's womb being Abram's child. Even though she's not part of the plan.

And even though this child is not part of the plan. But just by merit of him being a child of Abram means that he's still going to benefit from God's promise to Abram. At least in his life on earth. And in his family to come. And so what God is doing here is that he's just reminding us again that his promises are always effective.

[13 : 26] They are always powerful. He will always do what he says he will do. Even if we do stupid things. Isn't that an encouragement? Because I don't know about you but I do stupid things quite often.

I think we all do when it comes to our relationship with God and us trusting his promises. But even if we do none of that's going to stop God from carrying out his promises. He reminds us of in the story. And if only Sarai had believed that.

And known that at the beginning of this story. Then she probably wouldn't have done what she did and tried to achieve those promises in her way. She would have just relied on God.

Because what she did here was because she thought that her curse, her barrenness of her womb was really threatening God's promises.

That's what she believed. She believed that her not being able to have children is actually going to stop God from carrying out his promises. So she's got to do something. She's got to fix it. Otherwise God's not going to do what he said.

[14 : 30] That's kind of her thinking here. And that is what she did wrong in this story. She actually believed God's promises would not happen without her intervention.

She tried to engineer her own fulfillment of those promises. That God would do what he said but only if she helped him along.

That's what's going on here. She feels she has to help God. Now I don't normally use my children as sermon illustrations for obvious reasons. But our daughter has this habit of reminding us of our responsibility to feed her on a regular basis.

It's gotten much better over the years, I must admit. Her faith in our ability to keep her alive has grown over the years. But there was a time when she seemed to think that we would only feed her if she helped that process along.

And that's kind of like what Sarai is doing with God here. She seems to think God is only going to do what he said he would do if she helps that process along. But that's not the kind of faith that God is looking for in his people.

[15 : 44] I think this story is here in the Bible to give us a picture of a faith that is not the kind of faith that God's people should have. You see, because there's faith believing in God, believing in Jesus, believing in this stuff.

There's faith and there's faith. It's possible to believe these promises and know them to be true, but still to think that those promises will only happen if you help God along with them.

God's not going to bless me and make me happy and content unless I help him by getting a lot of money. God's not going to save me from my sins unless I do things to be worthy of that salvation.

Don't we think these things? Maybe without actually saying it. We have faith. We say we're Christians. We believe the stuff that the Bible says.

But then at the back of our mind, there's this little doubt. There's this little feeling that, well, God still needs our help if he's going to do these things.

[16 : 46] God helps those who help themselves. Have you heard that? That's not actually the kind of faith that God is calling for. That's actually pride. It's not faith at all. Thinking that we can in any way contribute to God's promises.

That's actually a mistrusting of God and an insult to him. It's saying, God, what you did is not good enough. And you're not powerful enough without me.

It's hugely prideful to think in those ways. And that is, in fact, exactly the type of thinking that the Apostle Paul was writing against in his letter to the Galatians that Dylan read for us earlier.

And then you would have noticed that he actually uses the example of Sir Ryan Hagar to make his point. So turn with me, Galatians chapter 4 from verse 21. Tell me, you who want to be under the law.

So, by the way, the Galatians were very into Jewish law keeping and going back to kind of these rules and laws that the Jews kept. And Paul was very adamant that they needed to.

[17 : 51] They weren't getting the gospel. They weren't actually having faith, even though they called themselves Christians. He says, you who want to be under the law, are you not aware of what the law says? For it is written that Abram had two sons, one by the slave woman and the other by the free woman.

His son by the slave woman was born according to the flesh. But his son by the free woman was born as a result of a divine promise. These two things are being taken figuratively. The woman represents two covenants.

One covenant is from Mount Sinai. By the way, that's where God gave the law to Moses. Mount Sinai. And bears children who are to be slaves.

This is Hagar. Now, Hagar stands for Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present city of Jerusalem because she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem that is above is free and she is our mother.

Okay, so what on earth is Paul talking about here? Well, he's using the story of Sarai and Hagar figuratively. But it's an important parallel that he's making.

[18 : 52] He's saying because Ishmael, Hagar's son, was born of the flesh, what he means by that is through human effort to achieve God's purposes, he will still be under slavery effectively.

In other words, that didn't make him a child of the promise. Just because he was Abraham's son didn't make him a child of the promise because he was actually born through human effort to achieve God's promises.

And so, in that way, he was still under slavery. And Paul says, well, in the same way, people who rely on their efforts to help God and their keeping laws to be saved are also under slavery and not part of the promise.

In other words, by doing what Sarai did and trying to achieve God's promises by your own efforts, it actually leads to slavery, not freedom.

Slavery to law keeping. Slavery to never knowing where you stand with God. And slavery to sin, which is much more powerful than your ability to do good.

[20 : 00] You see, thinking that you can be saved by anything you bring to the table is not only hugely arrogant and disrespectful to God, but it is also very dangerous.

Because not only does it result in slavery to laws that you could never keep. Worse, it makes you look to yourself to fix your curse rather than looking to the cross of Jesus Christ alone to fix your curse and what he did for you on the cross.

The moment you think you bring something to the table, you look away from Jesus and you look to yourself and you rely on yourself and you lose your faith in Christ.

That's Paul's burden here in Galatians 4. And maybe you've never actually looked to Christ in the first place properly. Think about your own life.

Maybe you've been coming to church for years and years and years. And you believe in Jesus and you say the Apostles' Creed. But you've still all this time been trusting yourself and what you can do to be saved from judgment for your sins.

[21 : 18] And you've been trusting yourself and you've never even seen your own life. And you've been trusting yourself and you've been trusting yourself. And you've been trusting yourself and you've been trusting yourself and you're not trusting in Christ. And if you tick those boxes and if you keep those rules, you feel, well, I'm safe. I'm saved.

Look at me. Look at my efforts and how they've achieved salvation for me. Well, if that's the case, you're not saved. Because you're not trusting in Christ. Even if you believe in him and agree to all the stuff that the Bible says, you're not actually trusting in him.

Do you see what I'm saying? And that was the Galatian situation. And when you're not trusting in him and you're still trusting in yourself, well, then you're still a slave.

Because you could never do enough to be saved. And so you're a slave to sin and still a slave to the law. You need to look to what Jesus has done for you instead and put your full trust in that alone.

That's the kind of faith that God calls his people to have. And if you have done that, if you have looked alone to Jesus Christ without bringing anything to the table, you've had, as Jesus himself says, faith like a child to enter the kingdom of heaven.

[22 : 31] Well, then the warning here in the story is don't slip back into habits of self-reliance, which it's so easy to do, thinking that you need to bring something to the table. Because we've got pride inside us, the very thing that caused us to fall into sin in the first place was pride that we don't need God, that we can do things ourselves.

That's Adam and Eve. And so we, because we've always got that tendency, even a Christian who trusts in Jesus can still slip back into that self-reliance and we've got to be on our guard against that.

And you can spot, I think, in a Christian's life when that is starting to happen, when you're slipping back into self-reliance. And it's when you feel that you're not worthy of God because you haven't been a good Christian this week.

You been there? And you start to doubt your salvation because you haven't kept up your good habits. But you see, when you do that, it means you're looking to yourself for assurance rather than to the covenant and promises of God that he has sealed in his sacraments that we learned last week.

You're looking inside for assurance rather than to what God has given you that is much more solid, his promises. And so you've got to be on your guard. We've all got to be on our guard against the self-reliant thinking that we can so easily slip into.

[23 : 55] And so how do we do that? How do we guard against this tendency to think that we need to help God along with his promises to us? Well, I think that's what the story also teaches us towards the end.

When we read how Hagar responded to God's promises to her in Genesis 16, 13. If you don't want to flip back, then just listen.

But the response is, in fact, do go back to Genesis 16. We'll end up there. Genesis 16, verse 13. So this is after Hagar fled into the wilderness.

God caught up with her. God reaffirmed that he is there. He is looking after her. He is going to fulfill his promises. And this is how she responded.

Verse 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.

[24 : 58] It's a beautiful response, isn't it? And it brings the story to a close by revealing, I think, what the problem was right at the beginning. Because Hagar now realizes that God has been here all along.

God has been seeing her all along. And he has been involved in all of it all along, even when it didn't seem like it. And that is what Sarai should have done at the beginning, right?

She should have realized that even though she couldn't conceive, God knows. And God sees. And God is still involved. And God will still achieve his promises despite that curse.

And she should have just rested in that. But she didn't. She tried to fix it herself. And so here's the lesson for us as we come to a close.

Firstly, God is reminding us again in this story that he's always going to fulfill his promises one way or another. But the question I think he wants us all to consider this morning is how are you going to react when the curse calls those promises into question in your life?

[26 : 07] Those times in your life when you have particular exposure to the curse. And it makes you doubt whether God actually fulfills his promises and whether God is actually caring and whether God is actually there.

Because that's going to happen. Life is full of situations where we will be led to doubt God's promises and his goodwill towards us. When you get that diagnosis or lose that job or fail that exam and your hopes are dashed.

When your work continues day after day, week after week to be a frustration and there's nowhere out of it. Or your relationship falls apart. Or just your own sin gets the better of you.

And you wonder, has God really got this? Is he really working all things for the good? Is he even here? Well, it's in those times that you will be tempted to forget his promises to you.

And to look to yourself and your own efforts to fix things. And to find blessing. Rather than look to God and what he's done for you. And so it's in those situations that you've got to come to that point.

[27 : 18] And Hagar came to in the wilderness and realized that right there in the middle of all the junk of this life. God sees you still.

And he's still got this. Even when it doesn't look like it. And it's in those situations where you feel the pressure of this life. And you feel the absence of God in this situation.

It's then more than ever that you need to know that nothing will prevent God from fulfilling his promises to his covenant people. Not even your own doubts in those promises.

And nothing will compromise his plans to ultimately rescue you completely from the curse. And bring you into the land of blessing for eternity if you are his child.

And right now he still knows you and sees you every step of the way. But. So while he's going to do all that. This is what you've got to know.

[28 : 17] He's going to do it his way and not yours. And he's going to do it in his timing. And not yours. So don't try to make it happen yourself.

Don't try to engineer your own blessings in this life. Apart from God. You know so many people who come to church.

Concentrate on God on Sunday. And they sing to him. These great songs of trust and reliance. But then. The moment they hit work on Monday. It's all about the rat race.

And getting their blessings for themselves. And chasing after their goals and treasures in life. And that just continues at a frantic pace. Until Sunday where they come back to church. And praise God. It's just.

It's two lives. You see. We. We. We. We must. Get out of these habits of chasing blessings for ourselves. That's not trusting God. And his promises.

[29 : 11] To give us all those blessings. But in his way. And in his time. And you don't need to work to find your own salvation from the curse. That'll only lead to a bigger mess.

Like it did in this story. What you need to do. Is trust that God will do that. Even if you don't know when. Or you don't know how. And when you can do that.

Well that's when you will find the real peace and rest in God. Even in the most difficult times in this life. So let's take those lessons from the story. And apply them.

As we go out into a new week. Let's pray. Lord we do thank you for this story. That has been recorded for us. And preserved over thousands of years.

So that we can. Through Sarai's. Negative example. We can see what the type of faith. That you're not looking for in us is. Thank you Lord.

[30 : 08] That you are the originator of our faith. Thank you that we don't have to do anything. To be in your covenant. Or be saved. Just believe that you have done everything for us.

And so we pray Lord. That you would help us to be people of real faith. Not just faith of our lips. That we say we believe. But faith where we actually live out that belief. In not trying to engineer our own escape from the curse.

But looking to you. Looking to Jesus and what he did on the cross for us. Day after day. And serving him. And trusting him. And Lord as we do that. Would you give us the peace that transcends all understanding.

Even in the middle of the troubles of this world. In Jesus name. Amen.