

Get into the Study



5 MINUTES

DISCUSS: Question #1 on page 126 of the PSG: “When have you seen failure lead to something positive?”



GUIDE: Direct group members to “The Bible Meets Life” on page 127 of the PSG. Introduce the importance of trusting God to redeem our failures by reading or summarizing the text or by encouraging group members to read it on their own.

RECAP: We all fail at times. When we make mistakes, it’s so easy for us to beat ourselves up. Whether our tongue gets the best of us, we drop the ball at work, or we run back to an old addiction, our sins and failures can completely crush our confidence. When that happens, how do we pull ourselves out of the dugout and get our heads back into the game of life? Let’s take some coaching tips from the life of Abram.

SESSION 5

Confidence After We Fail

THE POINT

Trust God to redeem your failures.

LIFE CONNECTION

We often take matters into our own hands. We make mistakes. Even more, we sin against God. The world may label us as failures, but not God. Regardless of what we’ve done, we are never beyond the love and grace of God. When we turn to God and trust Him, He brings us into an incredible relationship with Him. He will still work in our lives as we follow Him.

THE PASSAGES

Genesis 16:1-5; 17:1-9

THE SETTING

It had been about ten years since Abram left Haran, and Sarai had not been able to bear a child. She was now seventy-five years old. Sarai wanted to see God’s promises to Abram fulfilled, but it was not happening. What could she do? Waiting on the Lord can be difficult. Is there something He wants us to do to make His promises come true? Sarah thought she had a solution to her waiting.

GENESIS 16:1-5

1 Now Sarai Abram’s wife bare him no children: and she had an handmaid, an Egyptian, whose name was Hagar.

2 And Sarai said unto Abram, Behold now, the LORD hath restrained me from bearing: I pray thee, go in unto my maid; it may be that I may obtain children by her. And Abram hearkened to the voice of Sarai.

3 And Sarai Abram’s wife took Hagar her maid the Egyptian, after Abram had dwelt ten years in the land of Canaan, and gave her to her husband Abram to be his wife.

4 And he went in unto Hagar, and she conceived: and when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress was despised in her eyes.

5 And Sarai said unto Abram, My wrong be upon thee: I have given my maid into thy bosom; and when she saw that she had conceived, I was despised in her eyes: the LORD judge between me and thee.

1 ▶ *Verse 1.* Waiting on the Lord is not easy. Sarai was now seventy-five years old, and she was barren. From a human perspective, there was no reason to think she could have a child at her age. However, she knew God’s promises to Abram depended on the conception of a child in her womb—or did they? After all, God promised Abram would have innumerable descendants, but did that necessarily mean God’s promise would be fulfilled through her? **She had an handmaid, an Egyptian, whose name was Hagar.** Perhaps God could fulfill His promises to Abram some other way?

Verse 2. A custom or practice that is legal may not be moral, and that was certainly the case in Sarai’s suggestion that Abram have relations with Hagar so that Sarai could **obtain children** through her. It was not unusual for a slave to become a concubine in Old Testament times, particularly during the patriarchal period. A concubine was a female slave given to a man with whom he could have sexual relations so that he could have children with her. It was especially common when the wife was barren. It was vital in that culture for a man to have children. Children were a heritage or reward

ACTIVITY (OPTIONAL):

In advance, bring a can of WD-40®. **Ask:** “Who has ever used WD-40?” **Say:** “Did you know that WD-40 was originally a failure? That is actually part of the reason why it is called WD-40. The inventors of WD-40 were trying to create a degreaser and rust protection lubricant, and it took them forty attempts before they created a successful formula. WD-40 stands for Water Displacement, 40th formula.” **Ask:** “Can you imagine if the inventors of WD-40 had stopped after thirty-nine attempts and had not tried one more time?” **Say:** “Just as the inventors of WD-40 failed thirty-nine times, we have failed many times, but God’s grace is greater than our failures. God will redeem our failures if we confess our sins and admit that we have failed. He may even surprise others by the way He is able to use us.”

GUIDE: Call attention to “The Point” on page 127 of the PSG: “Trust God to redeem your failures.”

PRAY: Transition into the study by asking God to help the group see our failures. Thank Him for being willing to redeem them to bring glory to His name.

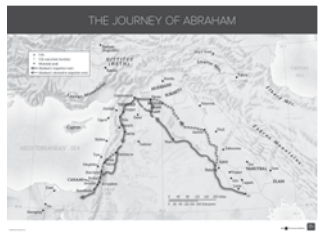
Study the Bible

Genesis 16:1-5



10 MINUTES

LEADER PACK: Display **Item 7: The Journey of Abraham** poster to give context for the events in these Scripture verses. Point to places and events on the map as they are discussed.



READ: Ask a group member to read aloud Genesis 16:1-5 on page 128 of the PSG.

GUIDE: Use Commentary **1** on pages 131-132 to help explain the social custom behind this failure.

from the Lord (Ps. 127:3). Even in New Testament times, a barren woman would feel disgrace (Luke 1:25).

It was not God's design in marriage for a man to have more than one wife (Gen. 2:24). Sin causes strife, and bitterness and contentiousness accompany polygamous relationships. That would be the case with Hagar and Sarai. However, God is gracious, and He would show grace to all involved. Sarai justified her suggestion to Abram by saying, **The LORD hath restrained me from bearing.** Abram agreed to Sarai's suggestion, so it is clear they are both to blame for what they did. Despite their impatience and sin, God would later allow her to have a child, and she exercised faith when that happened. The writer of Hebrews commended her for her faith (Heb. 11:11).

Verse 3. Sarai gave her Egyptian slave to Abram **to be his wife.** They had waited **ten years**, but God had not kept His promise yet. Abram thought God would keep His promise through his heir Eliezer, but that was not to be, so Abram took Hagar as a wife according to the custom of the day. Abram would have to learn once again that earthly wisdom leads to jealousy and selfishness (Jas. 3:14-16). If Abram had sought wisdom from God, he would have received it (1:5).

Verse 4. Abram **went in unto Hagar, and she conceived.** Sarai's plan worked, but she was not rejoicing. The success of her scheming made her miserable because Hagar now looked on Sarai with contempt. Hagar had been the servant, but now she was with child and was filled with pride. Sarai, by contrast, was a disgrace. Hagar was able to do what Sarai could not do, and now she could hold her head high and treat Sarai with contempt.

Verse 5. Sarai blamed Abram for what happened. Even though it was Sarai's idea for Abram to take Hagar as a wife, our sinful human nature often leads us to blame others for our own failures and sins. Of course, Abram did bear some responsibility too. He went along with Sarai's plan, and there is no indication he sought the Lord about it. Sarai said, **the LORD judge between me and thee.** Since she had already judged Abram, she was confident which way the Lord would judge.

Because Abram did not turn to the Lord for guidance, but instead gave Sarai permission to do as she pleased with Hagar, he was guilty of abdicating his responsibility

to lead (Gen. 16:6). Hagar was mistreated and ran away, but mercifully the angel of the Lord appeared to her and told her to return and submit herself to Sarai. He even promised to bless her offspring and make them too many to count. The appearance of the angel of the Lord may have been a theophany (a visible manifestation of God) of the pre-incarnate Christ, and notably, His first appearance was to a miserable outcast.

So we see that instead of trusting God, Abram and Sarai made a mess of things by taking matters into their own hands. Abram was a man of faith, but even the most faithful servants of God can stumble into sin when they take their eyes off the Lord. ◀

GENESIS 17:1-3

1 And when Abram was ninety years old and nine, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said unto him, I am the Almighty God; walk before me, and be thou perfect.

2 And I will make my covenant between me and thee, and will multiply thee exceedingly.

3 And Abram fell on his face: and God talked with him, saying,

KEY WORD: Covenant (17:2)—A covenant is an oath-bound agreement between two or more parties. God enters into covenant relationships with His people.

2 ▶ Verse 1. Abram made mistakes and fell into sin at times, but he continued to trust God. God knew Abram's faith would falter during delays and disappointments, yet He was committed to blessing him. God was about to fulfill His promise that Abram would have a son. God would do what seemed humanly impossible. When God does the impossible in our lives, we grow in our understanding of just how good and great He is.

Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran (Gen. 12:4). He was eighty-six years old when Ishmael was born (16:16). Thirteen years after Ishmael was born, at the age of ninety-nine, the Lord appeared to Abram again. This time, God said, **I am the Almighty God**. Some Bible commentators think the title could be translated "the Abundant One." Of course, God is both abundant and almighty. God is all-powerful, and He can meet every need we have. Why had God waited until now

RECAP: This account out of Abram's life is one of failure and of getting ahead of God. Sarai took matters into her own hands. Our twenty-first century Western mind-set might be shocked by Sarai's proposal. We see her suggestion as outright disobedience and the encouragement of adultery. But her heart was truly in the right place—she wanted to assist God with His plan—and the surrounding culture would not have thought twice about it. It was common in the ancient Near East for men to sire children through other wives or female servants.

DISCUSS: Question #2 on page 130 of the PSG: **"Why do we often want to take matters into our own hands when things go wrong?"**

Alternate: What led to Abram's failure in this passage?

RECAP: Abram again complied with Sarai and left the matter in her hands to correct. His statement: "Behold, thy maid is in thine hand" (v. 6), was to remind Sarai that she was still the wife and had the primary role. Abram added, "Do to her as it pleaseth thee." Unfortunately, Sarai abused her position and treated Hagar so horribly she fled.

TRANSITION: We are not to take matters into our own hands. In the next verses, we see that we are to do what God expects of us.

Study the Bible

Genesis 17:1-3



10 MINUTES

READ: Ask a group member to read aloud Genesis 17:1-3 on page 130 of the PSG.

GUIDE: Use Commentary **2** on pages 133-135 to help explain the significance of the Abrahamic covenant.

LEADER PACK: In advance, make copies of **Item 11: Biblical Covenants** handout and distribute them to your group members. Use this handout to help group members understand the primary covenants described in Scripture.



to reveal Himself by this name? Abram had waited and waited for God to keep His promise to make him a great nation with many descendants (12:2,7; 15:4,18). Now God was going to keep His promise and would show Abram that the Lord is indeed almighty. Later in the chapter, God told Abraham that his wife would give him a son, and Abraham laughed and said to himself, “Shall a child be born unto him that is an hundred years old? and shall Sarah, that is ninety years old, bear?” (17:17). He understood the preposterous nature of such a thing.

Nevertheless, the Lord would tell Abraham again in Genesis 18 that Sarah would have a son, and, sure enough, she did have a son about a year later. Sarah was by the tent listening to their conversation, and she laughed at the thought of having a child since she was past the age of childbearing. God heard her laugh, and the Lord asked Abraham in Genesis 18:13-14, “Wherefore did Sarah laugh, saying, Shall I of a surety bear a child, which am old? Is any thing too hard for the LORD?”

The answer, of course, is no. Nothing is impossible with God, and the birth of Isaac, whose name means “laughter,” proves it. A miracle is an event or phenomenon brought about by a special act of God that appears to suspend natural laws. However, God is the creator of natural laws—how things normally occur in the world—so He can certainly suspend these laws when He wants to. That’s what happened here; a miracle had taken place.

Miracles are also called signs in both the Old and New Testaments (Isa. 7:11,14; John 2:11). Isaac’s birth indicated that Yahweh was indeed Almighty God. Both Abraham and Sarah had faith in God, and the birth of Isaac gave them even more confidence that He is the God of all creation. Miracles were also called wonders (Joel 2:30; Mark 13:22). A person observing a miracle was often awestruck or even terrified by what they saw.

God instructed Abram to **walk before me, and be thou perfect**. Revelation and responsibility go hand in hand. God called Abram, and Abram obeyed. God called him to live in His presence and to be without blame. God did not call Abram to be sinless. Sinless perfection is not possible in this life. Rather, Abram was called to live with integrity, to walk without blame before God and others. Righteousness before others is only possible through reverence of the Lord.

Verse 2. God reaffirmed His covenant with Abram. It was not a new covenant God was making with Abram. God had promised to bless Abram's descendants and to give them the promised land, but it would be vital for the offspring of Abram to have the same faith as Abram so they could inherit His promised blessings.

God promised again that He would bless Abram. God said, **[I] will multiply thee exceedingly.** The genuine offspring of Abram would be like him. They would have his faith and not just be his physical descendants. The physical descendants of Abraham certainly had advantages. The apostle Paul spoke of this in Romans 3:2: "Unto them were committed the oracles of God." However, Paul also said that "he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly ... But he is a Jew, which is one inwardly" (Rom. 2:28-29).

Verse 3. Some Christians today bow their heads in worship; others lift their hands in worship. **Abram fell facedown**, showing humility and reverence. Of course, it's not the position of one's head or hands that indicates true worship; it's the position of one's heart. As Abram lay prostrate, **God talked with him.** ◀

GENESIS 17:4-9

4 As for me, behold, my covenant is with thee, and thou shalt be a father of many nations.

5 Neither shall thy name any more be called Abram, but thy name shall be Abraham; for a father of many nations have I made thee.

6 And I will make thee exceeding fruitful, and I will make nations of thee, and kings shall come out of thee.

7 And I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee.

8 And I will give unto thee, and to thy seed after thee, the land wherein thou art a stranger, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.

9 And God said unto Abraham, Thou shalt keep my covenant therefore, thou, and thy seed after thee in their generations.

RECAP: Thirteen years passed between Genesis 16 and 17; now God came to Abram again with a word of reassurance. God had not forgotten His promise. At this point in Abram's life, he may have assumed Ishmael, the son born to him through Hagar thirteen years earlier, was the child of God's promise. Frankly, we don't know, but we do know God was about to make it clear that Abram would have another son—the son of the promise (Gen. 17:19-21).

DO: Direct group members to complete "Engage" on page 134 of the PSG to help group members apply the principles from this passage.

DISCUSS: Question #3 on page 131 of the PSG: "How would you describe what it means to live in God's presence?"

Alternate: How are worship and obedience linked in the life of a believer?

RECAP: Abram had gotten ahead of God's plan when he sought a child through Hagar. He probably was not aware of that at that time, but now he was about to learn of God's greater plan. Abram didn't hear a rebuke from God, but he did hear a call to live in God's presence and move forward in obedience.

Note Abram's response to God's call to obedience and His reminder of the covenant: "Abram fell on his face." This is the position of respect a person in that culture showed to one who was superior. It was in this position of humility that Abram acknowledged God Almighty truly is almighty and expressed his willingness to obey. Abram was willing to do whatever the Lord required.

TRANSITION: In the next verses, we see that God seeks a covenant relationship with us.

Study the Bible

Genesis 17:4-9



15 MINUTES

READ: Ask a group member to read aloud Genesis 17:4-9 on page 132 of the PSG.

3 ▶ **Verse 4.** God spoke with Abram; He first said, **As for me** in reference to the covenant. In Genesis 17:4-8, God explained His part in the covenant. In Genesis 17:9, God explained Abram's role.

God made several promises to Abram as part of the covenant. God first promised Abram he would **be a father of many nations**. God would make Ishmael into a great nation, but God would not establish His covenant with him (Gen. 17:20-21). The covenant would be confirmed through Abraham's son, Isaac (v. 21).

Verse 5. A significant change would soon take place in Abram's life, and God indicated it by changing Abram's name. The name Abram means "exalted father." Abram humbled himself before God, and God exalted Abram in his lifetime. Today, Jews, Muslims, and Christians all honor the name of him. However, God changed Abram's name to Abraham because, as God said, **For a father of many nations have I made thee**. God said *I made thee* but some translations say, "I will make you" because of the use of the Hebrew verb form known as "perfect." The Hebrew *perfect* usually indicated completed action. It is quite likely this is what is called the "prophetic perfect," which means it is so certain that God will make Abraham the father of many nations that God speaks as if it has already happened.

A parallelism of thought is present in verses 4 and 5. "Thou shalt be a father of many nations" is similar in meaning to **A father of many nations have I made thee**. There is also a wordplay present, as the Hebrew words for "father of many," *abhamon*, sound like the word *Abraham*. Abram was childless with his wife Sarai, but he would become Abraham, the father of many nations, and it would be through Sarai.

God changes Sarai's name in Genesis 17:15 to Sarah. It is not clear what the name *Sarai* meant, but her new name meant "princess." It would be entirely appropriate as she would become the ancestor of nations and kings.

Perhaps some others were guilty of smirking and jesting as Abram related that God had changed his name to Abraham, "father of a multitude," while the only child he had was a son with Hagar. However, Abraham's name would be exalted when Isaac was born, and Isaac's birth would be a sign that God did speak to Abraham.

Verse 6. God then told Abraham that He would make him **exceeding fruitful**. God desires for humanity to be fruitful and multiply (1:28), and God would make Abraham *fruitful*. That meant he would have numerous descendants. **Nations ... and kings** would come from him. The fulfillment of this covenant would take place through Isaac, since God would confirm His covenant with him (17:21).

Verse 7. As in verse 2, God told Abram that He would **establish my covenant between me and thee**, but God now affirmed that it would also be a **everlasting covenant** with Abraham's descendants. God would command Abraham and all of his male offspring to be circumcised, and it is said to be a sign of "an everlasting covenant" (v. 13). It is clear from the New Testament that Christians are considered Abraham's descendants. Galatians 3:29 says, "And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise." The early church allowed Gentiles into the church, but they were not required to be circumcised (Acts 15:1,19-20).

God called all of the descendants of Abraham to be circumcised, but this did not ensure those descendants would inherit the promises. Ishmael was circumcised, but he did not inherit the promises (Gen. 17:23). Isaac would have twins, but only Jacob would inherit the promises of Abraham; Esau would not. Likewise, baptism is a sign that one has entered the new covenant, but one can be baptized and not partake of the new covenant. A Christian is justified by faith and not by faith plus circumcision. It is the spiritual dimension of the covenant that determines the descendants who inherit the promises. What is essential is the circumcision of the heart (Deut. 10:16; 30:6; Jer. 4:4; Col. 2:11). The eternal nature of Abraham's covenant is revealed by the spiritual work of the Lord as He convicts sinners and leads them to faith, regardless of their human ancestry. Paul would later explain that true circumcision is of the heart and not of the flesh (Rom. 2:28-29).

Verse 8. God also said He would give to Abraham and his descendants **the land wherein thou art a stranger**. God would provide **all the land of Canaan**, and God said it would be **an everlasting possession**, and He would be **their God**. The word **seed** in Hebrew is in the singular. It is a collective singular, which means it can refer to either a single item or a group. Christ is the greatest fulfillment of the promises to Abraham. Paul said in Galatians 3:16, "Now to Abraham and his seed ere the promises made. He

GUIDE: Use Commentary **3** on pages 136-138 to help explain the fatherhood of Abraham.

RECAP: God previously had made promises to Abram related to the land and his descendants, but now He formalized it with a covenant. Many covenants are found in Scripture, which are promises confirmed by an oath between two parties. The concept of covenant is important in Scripture since it both defined and established God's relationship with His people. Abram would, from this point on, carry a sign and remembrance of this covenant: a new name.

DISCUSS: Question #4 on page 133 of the PSG: "**What has God made new in your life as you've walked with him?**"

RECAP: The promise first given to Abraham extends to all who put their faith and trust in Jesus Christ. “And if ye be Christ’s, then are ye Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (Gal. 3:29). The new covenant we have in Christ includes the promise of land because those who follow Him, those who are citizens of His kingdom, will inherit the earth and the kingdom of God (Matt. 5:1-10).

God sought a covenant relationship with Abraham, and He desires a covenant relationship with us also. Even as He told Abram, “Walk before me, and be thou perfect” (Gen. 17:1), He calls us to do the same.

DISCUSS: Question #5 on page 134 of the PSG: “**What do these verses teach us about the grace of God?**”

Alternate: What does this passage teach us about what a covenantal relationship looks like?

GUIDE: Refer back to “The Point” for this session: “**Trust God to redeem your failures.**”

saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ.” Those who belong to Christ are Abraham’s descendants.

Paul desired the salvation of the physical descendants of Abraham, but only those who have faith like Abraham are his offspring. Jesus told some Jewish leaders that Abraham’s children would do what Abraham did and would love Him (John 8:39,42). It is the spiritual descendants of Abraham, whether Jew or Gentile, who inherit the promises. It is the spiritual circumcision of the heart that is most important, not the physical circumcision.

If the circumcision of the flesh is no longer needed, what about the promise of the land? Was it to be an **everlasting possession**? Christians answer that question differently. However, surely the promise of the heavenly Jerusalem will be the greatest fulfillment of this prophecy about the land. Hebrews 11:10 says Abraham “looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God” The apostle John said a new Jerusalem will one day come down out of heaven (Rev. 3:12; 21:2,10).

Verse 9. It was essential for Abraham and his offspring to keep God’s covenant, and those who are “in Christ” are part of that covenant. Thus, Paul wrote, “And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the heathen through faith, preached before the gospel unto Abraham, saying, In thee shall all nations be blessed” (Gal. 3:8). We have a covenant-keeping God who is creating a people from “all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues” (Rev. 7:9), who come to Him by faith, the same faith of our father Abraham. ◀

ENGAGE

Only God can turn our mistakes into blessings. List five common areas in which people fail.

Choose one in which you’ve seen God work to turn something bad into good. Explain how God’s blessing gives you confidence that He can use you even if you fail:

LIVE IT OUT

We should trust God to redeem our failures. Choose one of the following applications:

- ▶ **Own it.** Take some time and ask God to search out your heart. Identify any mistakes or failures that rise to the surface. Stop pretending. Stop playing the game. Stop hiding and take responsibility. Now is the time to own up to it.
- ▶ **Confess it.** Don't delay; remember every moment counts. Literally change your position right now if you are physically able and get on your knees. Go before the holy living God and seek His forgiveness. Let Him know how much you hate that specific sin in your life.
- ▶ **Believe it.** Remember His forgiveness is instant; it is not a journey. Trust in the power of His forgiveness. Don't doubt it. Stand up. Suit up. The dirt is gone. You are clean. Then tell someone else about the victory He has given you.

Live It Out



5 MINUTES

READ: Direct group members to page 135 of the PSG. Encourage them to choose one of the applications to carry out this week.

Wrap It Up

SUMMARIZE: Read or restate this idea from page 134 of the PSG:

We can live in His presence because of Christ, and we can be blameless because Christ has forgiven us and made us blameless.

PRAY: Thank God for redeeming our sins and failures. Ask Him to help group members turn to Him quickly so they can embrace His forgiveness and move on to new challenges for Him.



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