

In his book *Better Decisions, Fewer Regrets*, Andy Stanley says, "Your decisions determine your story—the story of your life." When you think about it, it's true. Every decision we make becomes a permanent part of our stories. If that's the case, we should pause at every decision-making juncture and consider the story we want to tell.

It might be a decision about a move. You have a job here in the Bay Area. It's a good job; you're well paid; your family is happy here. Your kids are thriving. You're close to extended family. But you'd like to buy a house, and that seems impossible in this market. You start looking at housing prices and the job market in Austin, Texas. You could afford a home there. Is it worth it to uproot your family? Tough decision!

Or maybe it's a decision about a relationship. You're single and not getting any younger. You meet someone, and you hit it off. That person is all in and even hints at marriage. But there are some things about that person that cause you to hesitate. In fact, marrying that person would mean compromising some of your values. Should you continue despite your concerns? Or do you wait and risk losing the relationship?

Maybe it's a financial decision. A few weeks ago, I confessed to you my desire for a new truck. Well, trucks are pretty expensive these days. I drive a car that's dependable, and all paid off. A new car really doesn't fit into my budget. Should I dip into our savings or go into debt to get that truck? Or, should I stick with what I got?

All of us face difficult decisions. Often, they have a spiritual component to them. Our decisions reveal something about how we view God. Do we trust he sees us and is in control, or do we need to take matters into our own hands? Do we wait for the Lord to move, or do we embrace the old adage, "God helps those who help themselves?" Often, instead of waiting on the Lord, we act first and then ask the Lord to bless our plans later. Certainly, there are times to move forward boldly and act, but when do we cross that line and begin to run ahead of God because deep down, we really don't believe he sees and knows our situation?

Abram and Sarai's dilemma

Heroes of the Bible weren't exempt from making such mistakes. This was true of Abram. We've seen how God promised Abram he'd have a son, an heir. Last week, we saw how God told him, "...a son who of your own flesh and blood will be your heir" (15:4). God even promised his offspring would be as numerous as the

stars of the sky. And the Lord sealed his promise with a solemn covenant ceremony.

But when we come to Genesis 16, Abram and Sarai are still childless. This is stated bluntly in verse 1a, "Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children." Later, in verse 3, we learn they'd been in Canaan ten years, so you can imagine how they're feeling. I wonder how many people they told about God's promise. With each passing day, I can see people running into them, sheepishly asking, "Any news?" How often they must have prayed, "Hey, God! Hello! Remember us? We're not getting any younger!" This would be especially difficult for Sarai. In that culture, a woman's inability to have children was seen as punishment from God for some terrible sin. There were even cases where it was seen as a cause for divorce.

Sarai proposes a solution, and Abram agrees

It's in these times we're most vulnerable to taking matters into our own hands and running ahead of God. I mean, if God won't do it, maybe I need to look out for myself. That's what Sarai is thinking. The writer goes on,

But she had an Egyptian slave named Hagar; 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. 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. He slept with Hagar, and she conceived. vv. 1b-4a

Clearly, the shame of not having children hit Sarai differently and even harder than it hit Abram. Abram's frustration was her disgrace. So instead of waiting for God to fulfill his promise, she takes matters into her own hands and suggests Abram have a child by her Egyptian maidservant, Hagar. This sounds scandalous to us, but you can understand Sarai's thinking. First, she was operating within the bounds of the laws and customs of her times. A legal custom in the ancient near east allowed the husband of a childless woman to take her servant as his second wife to produce an heir. The child of that union would then be adopted as the first wife's child. Sarai probably thought this would be God's way of fulfilling the promise for them to have a child. Besides, God told Abram the heir would come from his own flesh, but he hadn't told her he'd come from her flesh. Maybe someone else could be the mother.

Abram must have given it some serious thought, but in the end, he did what most men do—what his wife told him to do! The language used mirrors the much earlier example of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3. Just as Sarai offered Hagar to her husband, Eve offered the fruit to Adam. Adam followed the lead of his wife and ate. In a sense, Abram did the same thing. Even though Hagar conceived, this wasn't God's way of solving the problem. Abram should have waited. His wife might have been angry, but down the road, he'd save both of them from a lot of pain. But, on the surface, it all seemed to work out. Hagar conceived.

Let's reflect on how this decision was made. It was made in desperation. They feel forgotten by God. "Where's God? Doesn't he see our situation?" They might have rationalized God wanted them to pursue the fulfillment of the promise rather than wait for it. It's in those times of desperation we're most vulnerable to rationalization. And it's in those times we need to wait. Did you notice no one paused and prayed about this? There's no indication either Abram or Sarai consulted God first. Perhaps they thought since it was a culturally acceptable option, it was okay. I'm sure people around them said, "Go for it; it makes total sense." Believe me; you can always find someone to back up your bad decision.

The consequences of their decision

The one we call St. Augustine once wrote, "Sin comes when we take a perfectly natural desire or longing or ambition and try desperately to fulfill it without God." Whenever we do that, there are consequences, both for us and for others impacted by our choices. The consequences were felt first in Abram's home: When Hagar knew she was pregnant, she began to despise Sarai.

When she knew she was pregnant, she began to despise her mistress. 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." "Your slave is in your hands," Abram said. "Do with her whatever you think best." Then Sarai mistreated Hagar; so she fled from her. vv. 4b-6

Until now, Hagar has done nothing wrong. In fact, she's a victim of other peoples' selfishness and cruelty. When the decision was made to hand her off to Abram, she didn't have the right to refuse. But Hagar wasn't perfect. The text says she "despised" Sarai. It's a strong word describing a very human response to the situation. Perhaps she found subtle ways to remind Sarai of her barren womb. One thing important to notice: at the end of verse 3, it says Hagar actually became Abram's wife, which means she was no longer a maidservant. This didn't always happen in these situations; it was done to ensure the child would be Abram's legal heir. But she used her new status to compete with Sarai and rub her infertility in her face. It wasn't right to act that way,

but she hasn't asked to be put in this situation. Sarai created her own rival.

When we stop trusting God and begin to suffer the consequences, we usually start blaming others. We see this in Sarai. First, she blames God. She complains to Abram, "*the Lord has kept me from bearing children.*" That might have been true, but behind those words is a bitter spirit. She's saying, "God put us in an impossible situation. We've no choice but to act on our own."

Not only does she blame God, but she also blames her husband. She says to him, "This is all your fault! Look what you've done to Hagar!" How real is this! We stop trusting God. We act out in the flesh. Things go sour. We find someone to blame. But they're both at fault. Neither trusted God. Husband and wife were complicit in their sin.

Once again, Abram lets his wife call the shots. He can't handle her anger, so he says, "She's your servant, so do what you need to do!" Such a guy thing to say! So Sarai treats her harshly. We can only imagine what cruelties Sarai imposed on Hagar. Notice in verse 5, Sarai now calls Hagar, a slave instead of a wife. In verse 6, Abram does the same. Hagar's been demoted! Finally, Hagar decides she's had enough and runs away. She headed home towards Egypt. It's like a reverse Exodus. As the Hebrews would later flee Egypt because of the harsh treatment of the Egyptians, Hagar flees the Hebrews and heads back to Egypt because of their harsh treatment. And no one from Abram's home goes after her. Sarai and Abram are content to brush the whole affair aside and sweep it under the rug.

But imagine the tension and mistrust in their home. Their little experiment in fixing the problem backfired in a big way. When we make decisions not rooted in faith, when we succumb to the lie that God doesn't know us and see us, the consequences often show up in our homes.

God appears to Hagar as the God who hears and sees

What's surprising about this story is the one we'd least expect to make the right decision ultimately did just that. Starting in verse 7, Hagar takes center stage. She's run from Abram and Sarai. She's had enough. She's like many who might want to flee from their situation. She heads towards a place called Shur. Few places are as forbidding as this place—torturous heat, unending waterless waves of sand. Not a great place for a pregnant woman with no one to look after her, no one who sees her, no one to hear her cry.

But someone does see her. "*The angel of the Lord found Hagar near a spring in the desert; it was the spring that is beside the road to Shur*" (v.7). This is the first mention of "the angel of the Lord" in the Bible. Many believe he's the pre-incarnate Christ. In fact, later in verse 13, Hagar says she's seen God and lived. God is seeking Hagar. Aren't you glad he seeks us? It doesn't appear Hagar is seeking him. She's running away to Egypt. But God sought her.

Why would he seek Hagar of all people? Why bother with this Egyptian, fugitive, slave girl? Because God cares about such people. He cares about the people who feel invisible in our society, and he seeks them.

Notice the Lord addresses her in a personal way. *“And he said, ‘Hagar, slave of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going?’”* (v. 8a). Did you know this only time in all of ancient Near Eastern literature, including the Bible, where a deity addresses a woman by name? It must have startled Hagar that he knew her name. Not only does he speak her name, he asks her two questions: “Where have you come from, and where are you going?” I’m always intrigued by how God asks questions. It’s not like he’s looking for information! But these questions force us to look at ourselves and to think through what we’re doing.

Look how she responds. *“I’m running away from my mistress Sarai,” she answered*” (v. 8b). She answers the first question but not the second. Maybe she didn’t want to face the facts. What kind of life would she have back in Egypt? She’d left there a slave; she’d surely return as one. But now, she had no owner, no protection, no one to provide for her child. Where was she going?

Then he issues her a no-nonsense command. *“Then the angel of the Lord told her, ‘Go back to your mistress and submit to her’”* (v. 9). Those couldn’t have been easy words to hear. The one place she didn’t want to be was in that woman’s house. Submit to her? So often, this is the hard call of God upon a person’s life. He calls us to live in a situation that’s less than perfect.

The point isn’t that a woman should stay in an abusive situation. Aside from that, God doesn’t always deliver us from our tough circumstances, but he meets us in the middle of them. And there are things about him you can’t experience anywhere but the very place you want so badly to escape from. So at times, he calls us to go back and submit to those people and those circumstances God has placed us under. Sometimes we think, “Well, I’ve made a wrong turn in my life, but there’s no way I can go back.” But sometimes you can go back. You can go back to the same situation, a different person with a different perspective.

This command came with a promise of blessing

The angel added, “I will increase your descendants so much that they will be too numerous to count.”

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. 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.” vv. 10-12

Just as Abram was promised countless offspring, so is Hagar. Then the angel speaks about the child in her womb. She was to name him Ishmael. He would be “a wild donkey of a man.” He would be a fighter, untamed. She may have thought, “This

is awesome! I’ve always wanted a wild donkey of a man! No one will mess with my son!” After being mistreated in Abram’s home, Hagar must have taken some comfort her son would stand up for himself. I spoke to a mom in our church who said God used this very verse to comfort her because her son is a wild donkey, too. And she learned it’s not her job to change that. All she can do is work with it and try to channel that towards a redemptive purpose.

But the most important thing about this promise is it’s a turning point in her own relationship with the Lord. Ishmael means “God hears.” Every time she or someone else called his name, she’d remember God heard her cries in the wilderness. Hagar must have been stunned by this. The gods of Egypt she grew up with would never notice a slave girl. In order to get them to notice you, you had to be high up on the priest ladder. You had to coax them, flatter them, even feed them. But she takes it even further. She realized not only did God hear her, but he sees her.

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.” That is why the well was called Beer Lahai Roi; it is still there, between Kadesh and Bered. vv.13-14

Hagar is so shocked by this encounter she gives God a name. In fact, she’s the only person in the Bible to give a name to God. This name reflects what she learned about him. He’s “the God who sees.” She’s amazed she’s survived seeing the One who sees her. She names the well “the well of the living One who sees me.” The writer tells us that well is still there.

Today, we hear this and think, “Such a basic truth. God sees me. God sees everybody.” You don’t have to go to Sunday School to learn that. Everyone knows it. It’s the most basic thing about God. Theologians have a fancy term for this—the omniscience of God. The idea is that God sees all things because he knows all things. That might be good for a seminary class, but how does that help me? How does that help a woman unable to have the children she’s dreamed of? How does that help a dad in the trenches of just trying to keep a job? How does that help a single mom who feels abandoned and overwhelmed? How does that help a young girl or boy who’s lost a parent?

The key is how Hagar personalized this. He isn’t just the God who sees; he is the God who sees me. That is why she named the well “The well of the living One who sees me.” He doesn’t just see generally; he sees specifically. He sees me. He sees me as if there was no one else in the world for him to look at. You, today, are seen by God as if there’s no other creature in the universe but you. Can you conceive that? Suppose every living creature in heaven and earth died, and you’re left alone, and God is looking at just you. That’s how it is. God looks at you as if you’re the only one on earth. It’s like when I used to get my son or daughter’s team pictures. Who do I look for first? Who’s the one I see?

And he sees you entirely. He doesn't just see where you are and what you're doing. He sees within. He saw within Hagar. He saw her hurt, her bitterness, her rage, and he pursued her. You may be harboring some bitterness or resentment. You may be nursing some secret desire or fantasy no one knows about. You may feel estranged from God as a result. But God sees what's in your heart, and he still pursues you.

And he sees you constantly. There are times you want to be alone. You go to a place where no one can see you. But God sees you. You find yourself at a place in life where you know you shouldn't be. You're out in the wilderness by the spring on the way to Shur. You're heading back towards your old life. God sees. He doesn't just see you when you're in his will, but He sees you when you're out of it.

The best thing of all is he sees you supremely. Years ago, I left the house one morning for work and stopped at Peet's to get a cup of coffee. I was standing in line and noticed a number of people staring at me. I was wearing a new leather jacket, and I thought, "Well, I must be looking really good this morning." When I got back in my car, I discovered I'd left something at home. I drove home, and when I walked into the house, Lynn looked at me dumbfounded. She said, "Don't tell me you went to Peet's like that." It turns out I'd cut myself shaving that morning and stuck a number of little pieces of tissue on my face to blotch the blood. I'd forgotten to remove them before I went out in public! I couldn't see them, but everyone else could.

God sees us better than we can see ourselves. He sees what we need better than we do. That's why we have to lay down our own wisdom and make hard decisions to return to the path he's given us to walk on. We know Hagar did this. *"So Hagar bore Abram a son, and Abram gave the name Ishmael to the son she had borne. Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore him Ishmael"* (vv. 15-16). This is the most important decision Hagar ever made. She obeyed the Lord and went back to Canaan to live with Abram and Sarai. It was hard, but it was the right decision. I believe Hagar went back a changed woman. Why? In that culture, it was a man's right to choose the name of his child. But Abram used the name she brought back for the child. Why do that? Why let her name the child? Because he believed God really had heard her and seen her.

It's like the old gospel hymn we used to sing. "His eye is on the sparrow, and I know He watches me." What if Abram and Sarai had understood this? What if they had believed that he is the God who hears and sees? What if they had believed he really sees

them? They would never have made that mess. Sarai would have never suggested Abram take Hagar as his wife. Abram would have never consented if they had only known that he's the God who sees them.

It was this revelation that allowed Hagar to make the most important decision she'd ever make—to return to what seemed like an impossible situation. How could she do that? She's near safety with her own people in Egypt. The only reason she can return to Canaan is now she knows God sees her. Her own eyes have been changed. She's not just a womb anymore. Her worth isn't in one-upping Sarai anymore. She's the woman who's been seen by God, heard by God, found by God, protected by God, and her son named by God. As she keeps her eyes on this God who sees her, everything changes.

Your decisions, my decisions, will be driven by our vision of God. If we know him as the God who sees us and hears us, we'll act in faith and obedience to Him. If we don't, we'll spend our lives fending for ourselves, running ahead of God, and running away from the very circumstances God chooses to use to mold and shape us into his image.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

© 2021 Central Peninsula Church, Foster City, CA
Catalog No. 1457-4FC