

THE COMPASS

Desperate Housewives of the Bible, Part 1 **Sex and the Not-So-Single Girl**

Doug Brendel

Who's the most beautiful woman you can think of?

Hmmm.

Now let me ask you this:

How do you think she'll look when she's 65? Think she'll still turn heads?

How about when she's 90?

Can you imagine her still looking that good?

We're looking at "Desperate Housewives of the Bible," and one of the most desperate housewives in the Bible was also one of the most beautiful — in fact, maybe the single most beautiful woman in human history.

Her name was Sarah. She was the first wife of Abraham, the father of the nation of Israel.

Sarah was a knockout. She was gorgeous.

And you would think that this would be a tremendous asset.

Frankly, you'd expect her to be able to get anything she wanted from any guy.

Not to be sexist or anything, but come on, let's face it: you know how guys are.

But Sarah's astonishing beauty wasn't an asset. It was a problem.

Here's what happened (**Genesis 11-21**).

Abraham and Sarah were pretty well off.

They didn't have any children, but in Genesis 12 God spoke to Abraham and told him that he would give him the land of Canaan — everything from the Nile River in modern-day Egypt to the Euphrates River in modern-day Iraq — and it would belong to Abraham's descendants.

Where these descendants were going to come from, who could tell?

Abraham and Sarah were both getting up in years, so it didn't seem too likely.

But Abraham said thank you very much, and life went on.

Now Abraham was in business with his nephew, and they had a big operation: lots of workers and livestock and equipment and stuff.

They were living in the Negev, between the Sinai Peninsula and the Dead Sea, when the climate shifted, and a famine began setting in.

They needed food, they couldn't seem to make it there.

I wish I could tell you that when God promised a certain piece of land to Abraham, Abraham planted himself there and said I'm staying here, God will provide. But he didn't.

He took matters into his own hands.

He decided they would go west, and relocate in Egypt, where there was plenty of food. *I wish I could tell you* that it all worked out great. That trusting God's promise and provision turned out not to be that crucial for Abraham.

But it didn't all work out great.

What Abraham failed to mention to Sarah as they were packing up their stuff was that where they were headed was going to be really, really dangerous.

Abraham waits till they're almost at the Egyptian border before he turns to his wife and says, "Uh, I need you to do me a little favor" (**Genesis 12:11-13**).

And he proceeds to explain.

The Egyptian men are going to take one look at her and want her for themselves.

According to their custom, they won't be "courting" her.

They'll just take her.

They had harems in those days — men kept women like prize horses in an elegant stable.

Sarah could expect to be "appropriated" for use by whichever guy managed to muscle out the other guys who wanted her.

But since a woman was considered to be the property of her husband — if the Egyptians realized that Sarah was married, they would likely kill Abraham to get him out of the way.

So as they're approaching the "Welcome to Egypt" sign, Abraham says, "I need you to pretend you're my sister."

Now this wasn't a total lie. It was sort of a half-truth.

Because Abraham and Sarah actually had the same father. Sarah was Abraham's half-sister; they were born to different mothers.

This practice was very common, completely accepted, in the early days of human history.

So Abraham was saying, Let's sort of go with this. Let's admit the sister part, but not the wife part — so they don't cut my throat.

They may take you and use you for sex anyway, but at least I'll still be alive.

And what could Sarah say? Maybe she could have put up a fight. But the way I read the history of that era, I don't think she would have gotten very far.

Women were objects.

I do wonder what went through Sarah's mind.

According to that culture, she had probably never had a sexual relationship with anyone but Abraham.

There must have been a certain dread, I would think, about facing these hooligans from a strange new country.

And here she is, *65 years old*.

You couldn't blame her for saying to herself, "What is up with this! I am a mature woman! I should not be going through this kind of stuff!"

But she has this gift. This shocking beauty.

Maybe she was unbelievably youthful for her age, so that people literally didn't realize

how old she was. This is what the historical details seem to suggest. Or maybe she had a kind of magical quality, so that you realized she was in her 60's, but there was something about the way she looked, the way she carried herself, that just mesmerized you, like Audrey Hepburn. Sarah apparently had something that still made people crazy for her, even when she was in her mid-60s.

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So they cross the border into Egypt, and not only does Sarah's fabulous beauty create shockwaves — word shoots right up to the king's palace, to Pharaoh.

And it happens.

Sarah is conscripted into Pharaoh's harem.

We don't know what all happened to her there.

We know that, in the Pharaoh's own words, he "took her to be his wife."

He seems to have been pretty happy with Sarah.

The Bible says that "for her sake," Pharaoh treated Abraham really well (**Genesis 12:16**): saw to it that he acquired valuable properties, including livestock and servants.

Abraham was getting rich, by lending his wife to the king.

Who knows how long this might have gone on, except that God was grieving over this. How could he give his blessing to what Sarah was going through? This wasn't his best for her.

How could he give his blessing to what Abraham was experiencing? Abraham was profiting from the sexual abuse his wife was suffering.

In fact, this whole thing had started because Abraham didn't trust God to feed them in the Negev, and then didn't trust God to protect them in Egypt.

Something had to change.

And it did.

God withdrew his hand of protection from Pharaoh, and his family, and his palace staff.

People started getting sick, missing work.

People got sicker and sicker.

And finally, Pharaoh somehow figured out what was happening.

Genesis 12 tells us:

18 ...Pharaoh summoned Abraham. "What have you done to me?" he said. "Why didn't you tell me she was your wife?"

19 Why did you say, 'She is my sister,' so that I took her to be my wife? Now then, here is your wife. Take her and go!"

20 Then Pharaoh gave orders about Abraham to his men, and they sent him on his way, with his wife and everything he had.

We don't know how Sarah felt when she came out of the palace, a free woman, handed back over to the husband who had let her go.

All we know is that she went back to him.

There's no record of the dialogue between them, or how Abraham treated her.

Did they have to readjust to each other? Was there guilt? Was there hesitation? Fear?

Pain? Tears?

She had saved his life.

He had acquired a lot of stuff (**Genesis 13:2**); he had made a pile of money.

I wish I could tell you that the money solved their problems. But it didn't.

There were patterns being established in this marriage that wouldn't be easily broken.

There was a pattern of not trusting God.

A pattern of taking matters into your own hands instead of trusting God to fulfill his promise.

A pattern of telling half-truths, of sneaking through on a technicality.

Patterns of *manipulation*.

Maybe Sarah, as she watched her husband in the Negev, and as she followed him into Egypt, was learning the art of manipulation.

Because now, as she faced old age — she's over 75 years old at this point — without the prospect of a baby — no heir for her husband, which was a tragedy in that culture — having a lot of children gave you status in the community, and children were equated with the blessing of God — and here Sarah sees there's no apparent way for God to fulfill his promise of a nation full of descendants to occupy this "Promised Land" they were living in — she decided to manipulate events.

Here's how.

They had apparently brought back with them from Egypt a maidservant, named Hagar.

In the culture of the day, with large families so highly valued, a servant could be acquired as a concubine, to serve as a surrogate childbearer for the master's wife if she was childless — and when it came time to divide the estate, any children born to that servant would have equal standing with the children of the master's wife.

The only exception would be if the master proactively decided *not* to recognize the son of a maidservant.

So Sarah says to Abraham, here we have this Egyptian maidservant Hagar.

How did Sarah choose Hagar, out of all the maidservants in their employ?

I can easily imagine Hagar and Sarah as almost friends. Hagar is the favorite. She's loving and giving. She and Sarah talk like sisters, or like a mother and a daughter.

It's not like a master-servant relationship; it's a friendship. Sarah loves her.

So Sarah says, Let's use Hagar to make this promise from God happen.

And Sarah's rationale is pretty clever.

She uses God as her debate partner (**Genesis 16:2**).

She says, in essence, This is a God thing. If God wanted me to have the baby, he could do it. But he hasn't. We've been here in the Promised Land for 10 years, Abraham! God must have something else in mind, right?

And Abraham didn't take a lot of convincing.

He's 86 years old now, but this is a sexual opportunity; he could rationalize it very easily.

Yet the historical account makes clear that this liaison was not God's idea.

This was Sarah jumping the gun. Not trusting God's promise. Not trusting God's timing.

Manipulating events to achieve her own goals.

Trying to "make it work" on a technicality.

Sarah looks at Hagar and says, in **Genesis 16:2**, "**perhaps I can build a family through her.**"

God isn't coming through for me, but maybe if I take matters into my own hands, I can make something happen.

I honestly wonder if Sarah was flashing back to those nights she spent in Pharaoh's harem.

I wonder if she was conscious of how she was drawing Abraham into kind of a mirror-image of what he had done to her in Egypt.

Abraham had turned her over to one of the highest of Egyptians.

Now she was turning him over to the lowest of Egyptians.

Abraham had treated her in a way that suggested her sexuality was a tool to be exploited.

Now Sarah was treating him in much the same way.

Abraham had been willing to use her as a substitute for trusting God.

Now Sarah was willing to use him as a substitute for trusting God.

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I wish I could tell you it all worked out great. That trusting God's promise and provision turned out not to be that crucial.

But it didn't turn out great.

The law of unintended side-effects overtook them — and it turned out bad.

Maybe you're familiar with this part of the story.

Hagar does become pregnant, and there's trouble almost immediately.

As soon as Hagar realizes she's pregnant, her emotions change.

Where she was a prized maidservant before — loyal and faithful, the one and only chosen by Sarah to carry on the family line — now Hagar starts to resent Sarah.

Despises her, actually.

I can imagine her giving Sarah ugly looks. Maybe she grows sullen and withdrawn.

Maybe she talks back to her. Maybe she badmouths her to the rest of the servants.

There's tension every day. There's poison in the air.

Every time Hagar walks into the room, it's like ice forms. It stabs Sarah's heart.

It was probably inevitable that Abraham and Sarah would have major conflict.

Sarah goes to Abraham, she blames him for the trouble she's got.

"You are responsible for the wrong I am suffering," she tells him (Genesis 16:5). "I put my servant in your arms, and now that she knows she is pregnant, she despises me."

Abraham puts up his hands; he's not getting in between these two women.

“Do whatever you want with her,” he says, in essence (**Genesis 16:6**). “This whole thing was your idea. This is your game, not mine.”

I wish I could tell you that Sarah at least did the honorable thing, and sat down with Hagar, and said to her, “Honey, I’m sorry. This is just not working out.”

But Sarah had been victimized, and victimizing was what she knew.

She had been abused, and abuse was what she knew.

So her approach was to abuse Hagar.

The Scripture says she mistreated Hagar so badly that the pregnant girl ran away from home.

She only came back because out in the desert God spoke to her and told her to turn around and head home and submit to Sarah, to stop acting badly.

Even so, when she came back, it must have been miserable.

For her, for Sarah, for Abraham, for everybody.

But she had the baby. It was a boy. Abraham named him Ishmael.

And the boy started growing up.

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I wish I could tell you that the end of the story is sweet.

That Sarah finally had a transforming encounter with God, and became the very stereotype of nobility and righteousness.

But that’s not what happened — even when God fulfilled his promise to the letter.

Even when she did get pregnant, miraculously. Even after she did deliver a healthy baby boy, named Isaac.

It’s only when Sarah finally dies, at the age of 127, that we finally really get the big picture.

In Sarah we see that beauty doesn’t solve everything, and sex doesn’t solve everything, and getting married doesn’t solve everything, and having a baby doesn’t solve everything.

In Sarah we see that a lie doesn’t solve anything, and that the truth eventually comes to the surface, and that truth delayed can inflict more pain than truth on time.

We see from the span of Sarah’s life that God does fulfill his promises, even when we don’t believe him.

Even when we’re tired of waiting. Even when we’ve given up on him.

In Sarah we see that God does make a way for us, even when we’re going another way.

We see that God does what he says he’s going to do, even when we manipulate and connive and complicate matters.

We see that God’s Word can be trusted, even when we’re double-dealing and lying and scheming.

I’ve been Sarah, in a lot of ways.

In Sarah’s example we see how God can bless us even when we don’t deserve it. He just chooses us for some reason, and goes for it. That’s his love in action. I’ve been Sarah. I’ve experienced that.

In Sarah’s example we see how God can use us to fulfill his purposes even when we

don't seem worthy. Even when we're ugly. Even when we're bitter. Even when we seem to be working at cross-purposes to him. I've done that. I've been Sarah. But God keeps true.

In Sarah's example we see how God stays faithful even when we're flawed. Even when we don't learn our lesson. Even when we essentially thumb our nose at God's instructions.

I've been there. Way more than I want to remember. I've been Sarah, maybe even more than Sarah was! But God's been faithful.

But what I see as perhaps most significant in looking at the life of this remarkable woman is that even someone subjected to a pattern of abuse — someone who's been victimized repeatedly, and marked by those experiences — someone who doesn't know anything but abuse, someone who knows hardly anything besides being abused and inflicting abuse on others — someone that a psychologist today might shake his head over and say, "This is going to take a *lifetime* of therapy" — even someone in this seemingly impossibly beaten-down position can have a place of honor in God's Kingdom.

God had looked at Sarah years before and said:

Genesis 17:16 ...I will bless her so that she will be the mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her.

He didn't say "Well, if she can ever break out of this lifestyle of victimhood, I'll be able to use her."

No. He gave her a place of honor.

When she died in Hebron, Abraham mourned her, wept over her — he spent 10 pounds of silver — an astonishing amount of money — on a beautiful burial site for her.

He didn't say, "Well, her life was sort of all about pain and failure." No. He gave her a place of honor.

And in the book of Isaiah (**Isaiah 51:1-3**), when God talks about people who pursue righteousness — people who dedicate themselves to discovering God's design and living by it — where does he point?

He says, look at Abraham, and look at Sarah.

Here's evidence, he says, of how I'm going to deal with you.

You may be in "ruins," he says, but I'll look with compassion on you.

Your life may be like a desert, he says, but I'll make it lush and green.

I'll turn your wastelands into a garden, he says.

People will encounter you and they'll find "joy and gladness" in you, "thanksgiving and the sound of singing."