

A summary of Genesis 16:7-16

- 1. We not only need visions but also revelation from God in order to carry out the vision that God shows us according to God's way (Genesis 16:1-2).** Chapters 12-15 trace Abraham's growth in life, from the time he left Haran to the covenant that God made with him. We see a man hearing God's speaking and responding, building four altars, calling upon the name of the Lord, raising up a service team to walk through the land that God had promised his seed, fighting to rescue his nephew Lot, enjoying intimate fellowship and dialogue with God, offering himself and his possessions to God, and being willing for his offering to be divided in half, eventually consummating in a covenant that God establishes with him. Abraham truly was extremely high and rich in the divine life, and enjoyed a healthy "church life", may we say much higher than ours. At the same time his wife Sarah was in step with him, obedient and submissive to her husband, even in the most trying and humiliating of circumstances during their sojourn in Egypt in chapter 12. This couple epitomizes, perhaps for the first time in the Old Testament, a household, and portrays a healthy and vibrant church life, full of visions, consecration, obedience, submissiveness, raising up pillars, and intimate fellowship with the Lord. Yet something was still lacking. Did Abraham have visions? Absolutely. God revealed to him that his seed would be like the stars of the heaven (Genesis 15:5) and Abraham believed the Lord (15:6). Furthermore, God promised him that he would have a son from his own bowels (15:4). Abraham understood the vision. However, both his and Sarah's revelation was not that clear. As we see in 16:2, Sarah's proposal for Abraham to bear a child through her servant Hagar was no doubt in accordance with the vision that Abraham had received from God in relation to a son being conceived from his own bowels, but short of the revelation that God's purpose was for the child to be conceived of both Abraham and his wife Sarah, and not from another woman. Their revelation was partial. Why? Abraham and Sarah definitely fellowshiped together. The Bible does not record that they fellowshiped with God. Nor does the Bible record that anyone else fellowshiped with them. Where was Abraham's service team (the 318 men that he had raised up?) Was it fair to Abraham, and for that matter Sarah, to be forced to make a decision by themselves. Indeed, God had promised a son, but Sarah was barren and rightly singled out God as the cause! How then would she conceive? They had to find a way, almost by default, and here was a way that seemed to be the solution and also according to God's own speaking. Our own church life may shed some light on this matter. No one brother should lead the church. But sometimes, leading brothers may be forced to make a decision because no, or very few saints, fellowship their ideas and suggestions. Many saints prefer not to say anything and defer to the older brothers. Yes, the leading brothers fellowship together, and even pray together, but, like Abraham and Sarah, are trapped to make a decision that may not be the best. The church needs every brother and sister to consider every field or area of service in the church life, and every consideration needs to be fellowshiped so that any decision that is ultimately made is not made by one, or several brothers, but by the church. This means that we need to abide in the teaching and fellowship of the saints, and in particular of the servants of the Lord. Such a healthy exercise may bring in revelation in order to carry out the high visions that God may give us
- 2. We need to go to the Lord and repent whenever there are friction or offences in the church life (16:4-6).** As we have already seen, Sarah was quite mature in life and walked in step with Abraham her husband. She also loved Hagar very much. Why else would she have suggested to Abraham Hagar as a traditional surrogate mother? However, like us, both of them had the nature of the flesh, and acted accordingly. Hagar despised Sarah, perhaps because she was able to conceive and her mistress Sarah was not, and Sarah was angry with Hagar and dealt harshly with her, actuated perhaps by jealousy. This often happens in the church life. Do we complain about a certain brother or sister who has rubbed us the wrong way, or whom we think is too much in his or her speaking? Do we think someone is too proud? We may not voice our complaints or opinions, but we may internalize them nevertheless, and such an attitude will eventually rob the church life of peace, harmony and sweetness. What do we need? We need to go through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ in order to be saved from ourselves, that is from our flesh. How do we do that? By repenting, that is, saying "sorry" to the Lord and to the brother or sister in question. The more we come together to pray, the more we will be brought into the Spirit to enjoy a sweetness in our fellowship, regardless of whether we are Sarah or Hagar. We all have the fleshly elements of Sarah and Hagar in us, but rather than fighting with one another, we may instead come to the Lord by prayers and fellowship, thus being brought into a sweet oneness and intimacy with the Lord and with one another.
- 3. The Lord not only speaks to us but is also very straight in His speaking (Genesis 16:8-9;21:20-21; Romans 13:1-2).** Genesis 16:8-9 show us how warmly and lovingly God treated Hagar. Who was Hagar? Hagar may be likened to a young believer in the Lord, like us, raised up in a Christian home (the church life), probably served and trained by Abraham and Sarah. The Angel of the Lord (Christ Himself, the second of the

Trinity) appeared to her and spoke to her, asking her two questions: from where she was coming and where she was going (16:8). In the first question, God strikingly inserts an epithet in addressing Hagar. Rather than merely addressing her as “Hagar,” He adds “servant of Sarai.” In Hebrew, the actual meaning of servant is “slave.” A slave had no rights and belonged completely to his or her master or mistress. In His question, God immediately identified Hagar’s status as that of a slave. God will also ask us such a question. What is our source? From whom do we come and to whom do we belong? We must answer “God.” We do not belong to ourselves but to God. Such a question triggered an honest response from Hagar: “I am fleeing from my mistress Sarai.” Here, we see that Hagar’s level of life was not at all low. We must appreciate Hagar. She recognized firstly that she was a slave, and secondly that she was fleeing from her mistress. Do we recognize that we belong to God, and when God challenges us, often through the Bible and the brothers and sisters and the servants of the Lord, are we convicted to realize that we are fleeing from God? Hagar’s honest response enabled God to respond in turn by instructing her to return to her mistress and submit to her (16:9). God wanted Hagar to submit to Himself, but the way Hagar would submit to God was to submit to her mistress Sarah. So it is with us. It is easy for us to say, or for us to want, to submit to God. How can we submit to God? God may arrange a difficult or cutting boss in order to perfect us. If we cannot submit to a cantankerous boss who always finds fault with what we do, how can we ever submit to God? The Lord is the master of everything in this world, including good and bad bosses. He is the Lord of our boss and does not really care if we have a good or bad boss. Romans 13:1 states that every authority (our boss) is of God and instituted by God, and that if we resist that authority, we are in essence resisting God. Hagar grew through this encounter with God and by returning to Sarah. Do we grow in our relationship with the Lord by submitting to the authority that He has appointed over us?

- 4. Do we want to live the life of Ishmael or the life of Christ (Genesis 16:11-12; Ephesians 2:1-3)?** The Angel of the Lord prophesied that Ishmael would be a wild man or a wild donkey of a man, and that his hand would be against everyone and everyone’s hand against him. In modern language, he would be an assassin! Many people attribute the current situation in the Middle East and its inhabitants to the birth of Ishmael and his impact on world events. Actually, we must realize that we all are Ishmael, and that without the Lord’s mercy, we might still be living the life of Ishmael. Ephesians 2:1-3 tells us that we all were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind, following the course of the world, dead in our sins and trespasses. We are no different if we do not abide in the Lord. Ishmael was inside of Hagar and Sarah, and now in us. We are sinners. Where does Ishmael come from? Ishmael comes from Hagar, the result of unclear revelation. If we do not have clear visions, and if we do not fellowship with the Lord, the Ishmael in us will be lived out, and the people that we serve will also become Ishmael. We do not want the life of Ishmael, nor do we want to live out such a life, but rather we want the life of Christ in us to grow and be lived out of us more and more.
- 5. In the church life, God watches over us so that we see, talk to and know God (Genesis 16:7-8,13-14;21:21;25:11).** As we have already seen in point 3, God asked Hagar two questions. The second question He asked her pertained to where she was going. She did not answer that question. However, God appeared to her by a spring of water in the wilderness, eventually called Beer-lahai-roi, about 120 km from Hebron where Abraham and Sarah were living. Where was Hagar headed? Was she heading for Egypt? Perhaps she wanted to return to her roots in Egypt, especially during this trying time of persecution from the hand of her mistress. Yet she had a good heart and God came to her to reveal Himself to her as the God who watched over and took care of her by providing her with a well, typifying Jesus Christ as the water of life. Hagar had a personal encounter with God where she saw Him, knew Him and talked to Him (16:13). We must never despise Hagar. In some ways, she may have been a victim, yet God took good care of her and eventually saved her. Eventually, we find out that Hagar and Ishmael did not live by Beer-lahai-roi (21:21) but rather in the wilderness of Paran, from where Hagar went to Egypt to obtain a wife for her son. By contrast Isaac, the promised seed of Abraham, lived by Beer-lahai-roi (25:11). This shows that in the church life, there is a well, a fountain of life, which God provides for us and thereby watches over us to cause us to drink the water of life (Christ Himself in His word and the Christ in the brothers and sisters). As we live in the church life, we realize that we may live like Abraham and Sarah, or we may live like Hagar and Ishmael. Again, we should never criticize Hagar or Ishmael. It is not easy to follow the Lord. Many whom we serve may end up married to Egypt (the world), like Ishmael who married an Egyptian wife. The church life may not be perfect. Many times we do not know where we are going, but God knows. We may be going in the direction of Egypt, the direction in which Hagar was possibly heading. At the same time, there is always a well, and God will watch over us to provide us with the adequate supply of Himself as the water of life. May we be saved again and again, like Hagar, and may we live, like Isaac, by the well, enjoying the death and resurrection of Christ, to deal with the Ishmael in us, and to enjoy the sweetness of the life of Christ in us and in the saints.