

OK, this episode is a continuation of the Abraham series, and what we're talking about is one of the thorniest issues—sooner or later in real life—that believers can face in their marriages and other close relationships. That's when a person we are partnered with has a real crisis that precipitates a kind of lapse in their Christian faith regarding a particular issue—you know, a sort of *faith fatigue*. Let's parse that a bit.

So, just *who* am I talking about? Perhaps a spouse...or a close business partner...or maybe a long-time friend. You know, someone you have a truly meaningful link with, maybe all the way “back then” in time but especially *right now*. And I *am* talking about both of you being believers here. Yes, the New Testament does handle the idea of being unequally yoked...but that's a topic for a different time. Here what we're talking about is when both partners are followers of Jesus, and one partner experiences faith-fatigue.

Now then, just *what* kind of event am I talking about? Well, perhaps it's a debilitating, long-term illness, or perhaps a close relative who's rejected Christ so far, or perhaps a promise from God that's not yet fulfilled. And we're talking about issues where the missing answer is *jointly* sought...after all, that's what people who are in meaningful relationship do—share and pursue goals...share and overcome obstacles!

That brings us to Abraham, Sarah, and their Hagar event, and that explicitly brings us to the recent podcast episode titled “The Pull Date on Patience.” Go listen—it's designed to be instructive and encouraging.

So, to expand it here, we're revisiting that same Hagar event. Here's a synopsis. The key actions of the Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar event initiated a peculiar course of history for countless people, for better and for worse. See, long before, the Lord had made a covenant with Abraham about having offspring as numerous as the stars in heaven. We pick up on that narrative later in time, in Genesis 16:1-6 in the ESV (and remember, in this passage, the names for Abraham and Sarah had not yet been changed by the Lord.)

“Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. She had a female Egyptian servant whose name was Hagar. And Sarai said to Abram, ‘Behold now, the Lord has prevented me from bearing children. Go in to my servant; it may be that I shall obtain children by her.’ And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai. So, after Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her servant, and gave her to Abram her husband as a wife. And he went in to Hagar, and she conceived. And when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress. And Sarai said to Abram, ‘May the wrong done to me be on you! I gave my servant to your embrace, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt. May the Lord judge between you and me!’ But Abram said to Sarai, ‘Behold, your servant is in your power; do to her as you please.’ Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she fled from her.” Sadly, the millennia-long result of that harsh start was and often remains harsh conflict between Hagar's descendants and Sarah's descendants.

Now, the first foundation we *must* start with is this: both Abraham and Sarah are among the very few listed in Hebrews 11 in the “hall of faith.” So, Sarah's problem was not that she didn't believe God could act supernaturally. It's just that, here, God wasn't acting on a timetable that fulfilled her desires. But God *did* keep His promise later by blessing Abraham and Sarah at very advanced ages, doing that *fourteen years* later with their son Isaac! God's point to Abraham about all that: “Is anything too hard for the Lord?”

But, in Sarah's stage of frustration, she took action—or we should more accurately say that she asked for action from Abraham, that he sleep with Hagar in order for the family to add the promised offspring! And with that, we encounter key issues. Yes, Sarah had indeed reached her “pull date on her patience,” as we discussed in that previous episode. Or you might say that Sarah had *faith-fatigue*. But you also might recall that Abraham had his own lapses a couple of times before this—related to this very same issue!

So, let's look back, before the Hagar event. First Abraham got his call from God. And in Genesis 12:7, the Lord said to Abraham, “To your offspring I will give this land.” And Abraham built an altar there. But later,

in Egypt, Abraham “lent” his wife to Pharaoh, calling her his sister to protect his own life. Wasn’t that a lapse in faith, that God wouldn’t protect Abraham, even though the offspring promised were not yet born?

And in Genesis 13:6, after Abraham and Lot had separated, God again promised offspring to Abraham. And, to gain context, there is no evidence that Sarah was personally hearing God’s promises to Abraham—she got them second-hand. And now we see Abraham revealed his own *faith-fatigue* about God’s promise.

“After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision: ‘Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.’ But Abram said, ‘O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?’ And Abram said, ‘Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir.’ And behold, the word of the Lord came to him: ‘This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir.’ And he brought him outside and said, ‘Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.’ Then he said to him, ‘So shall your offspring be.’ And he believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness.” (Genesis 15:1-6) But faith-fatigued Abraham said to God: *Eliezer...will be my heir!*

So, this was Abraham’s own version of faith-fatigue...but, in this event, Abraham kept it between himself and the Lord. And when Abraham then believed fully again, the Lord counted that to him as righteousness! And, hey, there’s no indication here that this is a sort of righteousness that’s “limited” as a penalty for Abraham’s assertion that his heir was not going to be his offspring! Here’s the deal: God apparently does not expect our faith to always be at 100%—but He does want His people to work at restoring weak faith!

Now we arrive back at the Hagar event in Genesis 16. So, how about some key context for Sarah proposing the Hagar path. First, apparently the promises about offspring were said to Abraham...then “second-hand” to Sarah. Second, it’s unlikely that they were ignorant about age being a key factor in child-bearing—later Sarah says she is “worn out.” So, is it not understandable that, after years of waiting, Sarah might believe that perhaps *she herself* was the child-bearing obstacle to God’s promise to Abraham about offspring?

And, on a human level, this type of perception could have been complicated by Abraham’s previous faith-lacking willingness to “lend” Sarah to Egypt’s Pharaoh. What’s the big deal, then, that Abraham would be paired with Hagar, an Egyptian herself? Following Abraham’s example, did such an arrangement really defeat the standard of the cleaving dimension of a marriage? So, isn’t it humanly understandable that Sarah would speak up and suggest this “natural” remedy to fulfill God’s promise? Yes, *faith-fatigue* had set in. Now, then, we get to several possibilities for Abraham’s response.

First, Abraham could have simply pointed to their heritage of the Lord’s faithfulness, like Noah and Enoch and their miraculous events...as well as his personal experience defeating kings in war and his encounter with Melchizedek...and conclude with encouraging Sarah to restore faith! Second, Abraham could have shared that *he himself* had had doubts after waiting so long for offspring, but that the word of the Lord had then come to Abraham and his belief was restored. Third, Abraham could have appealed to the likelihood that having a child with Hagar could well precipitate the very difficult dynamics that it actually did—resentment and deep problems. Hey, perhaps Abraham *did* take one or even all three of these approaches. Nevertheless, the Bible tells us that Abraham *did act*, he acted on Sarah’s “Hagar proposal.” If so, in modern terms, Abraham was a sort of *enabler* to Sarah’s faith-fatigue. And there was a penalty to be paid, for thousands of years, by millions of people. But hold it now: we again recall that both Sarah and Abraham are heroes of faith in God! Yes, God is *always* faithful, but He doesn’t expect perfection from us!

Still, *faith fatigue* is a common issue—it can arise for us and for people we are closely partnered with. We can count on God to restore our faith and fulfill His promises. But we cannot always count on partners to help restore our faith. *Always*, our “vertical” relationship with the Lord is preferential, then *that’s* vital to all of our “horizontal” relationships. Yeah, listening to God begets great things, but listening to someone in a season of faith-fatigue can beget real problems. The believer’s privilege is to *help restore others’ faith*.

A&A: Application & Action

1. Can your “partners” in life—you know, perhaps your spouse, your life-long friends, your close associates at work—can those “partners” count on you to help restore their faith when they do experience faith-fatigue? Can you give specific examples?
2. Just how do you “recharge” or restore your faith when you hit serious fatigue? Do you study key passages in the Bible? Do you pray? Do you call a steadfast prayer-partner? Share the tactics or mix that you find most successful to get restored to the fullness of faith, especially on a long-standing issue. If helpful, write down a specific example of a past experience.
3. Name the top three people who have a history of helping you well with faith-fatigue. Have you called or visited them recently to thank them, giving them specifics of their actions that you are thankful for? Or, if you don’t experience faith-fatigue, please share your secret to that.