

Hagar

GENESIS 16:1-16; 21:8-21

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Two weeks ago, we started a series on great women from the Bible. These lessons have been at your request, and as you might remember, we started with Lydia in Acts 16, and we continued last week by looking at the life of Priscilla, also found in the book of Acts. This morning, we continue with another rather well-known woman in the Bible, requested by one of the young women of this congregation. One of our teens has asked for a lesson on Hagar. Scholars have not settled this once and for all, but the general consensus is that her name refers literally to “one who flees, a stranger, somebody who is on the run.” And when we start looking at her life in detail, we quickly understand how appropriate her name really is. In fact, Hagar’s life is a terrible mess, complicated, and complicated in a very bad way. She is not wealthy, she is not important by any standard the world might use, but her only claim to fame is that she is caught up in a big, ugly, family disaster.

To put all of this in context, back in the book of Genesis, we have the beginning, we have the fall of Adam and Eve, we have a downward spiral leading to the great flood in the days of Noah. After the flood, we have the languages of the earth divided in Chapter 11, and then in Genesis 12 we come to a man by the name of Abram (whose name was later changed by God to Abraham). God sees that Abraham is a man of great faith – not perfect by any means, but he trusted in God and God promised that he would multiply his family and that his family would be a great blessing on the earth. At God’s command, Abraham then moves to the Promised Land at the age of 75, not even knowing where he is going. Shortly after he arrives, there is a famine in the land, at which point Abraham and his family move to Egypt. We remember Abraham lying to Pharaoh about his wife, that she was actually his sister. Pharaoh takes her as his own, giving Abraham all kinds of animals and servants as gifts (almost as a dowry) until he learns the truth, but instead of having Abraham killed, he sends him on his way. Abraham then moves back to the Promised Land along with his nephew Lot, only by now, Abraham is quite wealthy. God renews the promise, this time specifically promising Abraham and his wife Sarah a son, and promising that their descendants would outnumber the stars of heaven. By the time we get to Genesis 16, though, ten years have passed since this promise – Abraham is 85 years old, and his wife Sarah is 75. The time for bearing children is long gone, and that is where Hagar comes in – and this young servant, most likely a gift to this family from the king of Egypt, Hagar is now pulled into the Biblical record.

If you will, let’s start with the first passage introducing us to Hagar – Genesis 16:1-16,

¹ Now Sarai, Abram's wife had borne him no children, and she had an Egyptian maid whose name was Hagar. ² So Sarai said to Abram, "Now behold, the Lord has prevented me from bearing children. Please go in to my maid; perhaps I will obtain children through her." And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai. ³ After Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Abram's wife Sarai took Hagar the Egyptian, her maid, and gave her to her husband Abram as his wife. ⁴ He went in to Hagar, and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress was despised in her sight. ⁵ And Sarai said to Abram, "May the wrong done me be upon you. I gave my maid into your arms, but when she saw that she had conceived, I was despised in her sight. May the Lord judge between you and me." ⁶ But Abram said to Sarai, "Behold, your maid is in your power; do to her what is good in your sight." So Sarai treated her harshly, and she fled from her presence.

⁷ Now the angel of the Lord found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, by the spring on the way to Shur. ⁸ He said, "Hagar, Sarai's maid, where have you come from and where are you going?" And she said, "I am fleeing from the presence of my mistress Sarai." ⁹ Then the angel of the Lord said to her, "Return to your mistress, and submit yourself to her authority." ¹⁰ Moreover, the angel of the Lord said to her, "I will greatly multiply your descendants so that they will be too many to count." ¹¹ The angel of the Lord said to her further, "Behold, you are with child, and you will bear a son; and you shall call his name Ishmael, because the Lord has given heed to your affliction. ¹² He will be a wild donkey of a man, his hand will be against everyone, and everyone's hand will be against him; and he will live to the east of all his brothers." ¹³ Then she called the name of the Lord who spoke to her, "You are a God who sees"; for she said, "Have I even remained alive here after seeing Him?" ¹⁴ Therefore the well was called Beer-lahai-roi; behold, it is between Kadesh and Bered. ¹⁵ So Hagar bore Abram a son; and Abram called the name of his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. ¹⁶ Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to him.

I'd like to get back to this passage in just a moment, but before we do, I want us to fast forward just a little bit to the next passage where Hagar is mentioned. After the birth of Ishmael, God renews the promise once again, only in Chapter 17, God specifically says that Sarah is the one who bear Abraham this son of the promise. She is 90 at this point, so Abraham basically says, "Oh, Lord, you must be referring to Ishmael!" [paraphrased]. But God said, **"No, but Sarah your wife will bear you a son."** We then have the angels visiting Abraham and Sarah several years later to announce that by this time next year Sarah will have a son. Sarah overhears this and laughs. These messengers of God then go on to check on Lot and what is happening in Sodom and Gomorrah, those cities are destroyed. We have the birth of Isaac in the opening verses of Genesis 21. By this time, Abraham is 100 years old; his wife Sarah is 90. They are absolutely thrilled, and that is where we pick up now with Genesis 21:8-21. Referring to Isaac, the text says (starting in Genesis 21:8),

⁸ The child grew and was weaned, and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. ⁹ Now Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, mocking. ¹⁰ Therefore she said to Abraham, "Drive out this maid and her son, for the son of this maid shall not be an heir with my son Isaac." ¹¹ The matter distressed Abraham greatly because of his son. ¹² But God said to Abraham, "Do not be distressed because of the lad and your maid; whatever Sarah tells you, listen to her, for through Isaac your descendants shall be named. ¹³ And of the son of the maid I will make a nation also, because he is your descendant." ¹⁴ So Abraham rose early in the morning and took bread and a skin of water and

gave them to Hagar, putting them on her shoulder, and gave her the boy, and sent her away. And she departed and wandered about in the wilderness of Beersheba.

¹⁵ When the water in the skin was used up, she left the boy under one of the bushes. ¹⁶ Then she went and sat down opposite him, about a bowshot away, for she said, "Do not let me see the boy die." And she sat opposite him, and lifted up her voice and wept. ¹⁷ God heard the lad crying; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, "What is the matter with you, Hagar? Do not fear, for God has heard the voice of the lad where he is. ¹⁸ Arise, lift up the lad, and hold him by the hand, for I will make a great nation of him." ¹⁹ Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water; and she went and filled the skin with water and gave the lad a drink. ²⁰ God was with the lad, and he grew; and he lived in the wilderness and became an archer. ²¹ He lived in the wilderness of Paran, and his mother took a wife for him from the land of Egypt.

Would you agree with me that Hagar is pulled into a rather disturbing family dynamic? This is a messed up situation. I think we see, though, why one of our young people would like to know more about this interesting woman from the Old Testament. Here she is pregnant, pregnant by this old man, kicked out of the home, forced to raise her son on her own – how strong!

As we look back over her life, then, I want us to keep these passages open, and I'd like for us to bring out three lessons based on a common theme between these two passages, and the common theme is: GOD SEES! In fact, back in Chapter 16, Hagar seems rather surprised that God finds her out in the wilderness, and her shock leads her to give a name to God that is unique and is not found anywhere else in the Bible. To Hagar, Yahweh is *"the God Who Sees."*

- I. **So, as we think about what happens in these two passages, I want us to go back to the first six verses of Chapter 16 here at the beginning, and I'd like to point out that GOD SEES, NO MATTER HOW WE GOT WHERE WE ARE – IN FACT, GOD SEES WHAT WE ARE GOING THROUGH, EVEN WHEN SIN WREAKS HAVOC IN OUR LIVES. GOD SEES US IN SPITE OF SIN – WHETHER IT IS OUR OWN SIN OR THE SIN OF SOMEBODY ELSE THAT PUTS US IN BAD SPOT – GOD SEES WHAT WE ARE GOING THROUGH.**

We look at the first six verses of Genesis 16, and it seems to me that Sarai is perhaps the worst offender here. She goes to her husband with the suggestion that God has prevented her from having children. That right there seems at least a little bit twisted. God had made the promise of a son, and yet it is God keeping her from having a son? That makes no sense. Sarah, then, tries to find a way around God's plan. Sarah tries to help God out a little bit. "Sure, this is what God has said, but surely he wouldn't mind if we did this instead." [paraphrased]. And so she hatches this plan of having Abraham go into her much younger Egyptian slave. Sarah failed to really understand the power of God. We think of what John the Baptist would go on to say in Matthew 3:9, *"...do not suppose that you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham for our father'; for I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham."* Sarah, though, does not understand this, and so she tried to find a way around God's plan. And think about her plan: She is abandoning God's plan for marriage. From the beginning, God's plan for marriage has been: One man and one woman, together and faithful to each other for life. Their son Isaac would be monogamous, but their grandson Jacob would go on to have four wives, and it got much worse after that. Sarai starts her entire family down a very dangerous path that would bring some terrible consequences for many generations, even into modern times.

I would also suggest that Abraham showed a huge lack of judgment and courage here as well. The problem is, when she came up with this plan, the Bible says, ***“And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai.”*** Not that it’s wrong to listen to your wife (usually it’s GOOD to listen to your wife), but in this case it was wrong! We have 85-year old Abraham being told by his 75-year old wife to go try to have a kid with their much younger servant girl, and Abraham’s response was basically, “Well, dear, if you insist! I will take one for the team!” And so he gives in and follows what is actually a terrible plan. God’s plan is for this kind of intimacy to be reserved for marriage between a man and a woman. For just a little parallel here, we think about Adam and Eve. It all fell apart when Adam failed to provide spiritual leadership in that family. When Adam followed instead of leading, God’s plan fell apart. And so although Sarah might have led this effort, Abraham (like Adam) sinned when he went along with it.

And in fact, this seemingly good plan goes bad almost from the beginning. When Sarah sees that Hagar has conceived, she can’t stand it! There was this hatred that came up between them. Sarah takes it to Abraham for a solution, and Abraham tries to back away slowly, “This is not my problem! You do whatever you need to do” [paraphrased]. And of course, Sarah begins treating Hagar harshly. She might not have technically kicked her out, but she made life so miserable at home that she almost has to leave, and so she heads off into the wilderness, toward Egypt. She seems to be going home here. But what is amazing here is that the angel of the Lord finds her in the wilderness. God could see what she was going through. God could see that she was caught up in a terrible situation and was suffering for it. And remember: None of this was really her fault. She is a slave who is forced to be this surrogate for her masters. This is not her idea, but she is the one who is suffering for it. She is the one who is miserable.

And here we apply this passage to our lives today: Many times we might get caught up in something that is completely messed up – maybe we’re getting harassed at work, maybe we lose a job even though we’ve done nothing wrong, maybe there is some conflict that springs up that we have nothing to do with but it affects us more than anybody else, or even when we might be at fault (whatever it is) – during those times, God sees what is happening. He is the God who sees, and we have this reminder because of Hagar.

And what really stinks in this passage is that Abraham and Sarah are supposedly God’s people! Out of the three people in this story so far, Abraham and Sarah are the ones who should have been treating Hagar with the utmost of respect. As those who knew God, they are the ones who should have helped. Sometimes, therefore, God’s people are the ones who might be contributing to our misery. In those cases especially, then, we come back to Hagar – this Egyptian servant girl (far away from home) is mistreated by Sarah and Abraham (the father of the faithful), and God sees what is happening here.

II. As we move into verses 7-16, I would point out a second idea from the life of Hagar, and that is: GOD SEES, NO MATTER WHERE WE ARE. So first of all, God sees, no matter how we got there. But now we find that God sees, NO MATTER WHERE WE ARE.

I think of something I heard years ago where a lunch lady in Christian school had put a sign on the apples, “Take one: God is watching.” Later in the line, there was a pile of cookies, and one of the students had made his own note, “Take all you want: God is watching the apples.” As we know, though, God sees everything!

Starting in verse 7, ***“the angel of the Lord”*** finds Hagar by a spring of water in the wilderness. So, she has already made it partway to Egypt, about 50 miles so far – expecting a child, traveling through the desert. This is the first time, by the way, that we see ***“the angel of the Lord.”*** Many believe that this is the first appearance of Lord Jesus himself in scripture, and we have good reason to believe this. The word ***“angel”*** simply means

“messenger.” Sometimes the word refers to a special class of beings described as messengers of God (or angels), but sometimes this word seems to refer to deity in the Old Testament. Sometimes the line is blurred. We think of the **“angel of the Lord”** appearing to Moses in the burning bush, and before we know it, Moses is talking to God, the **“I AM.”** We think of the **“angel of the Lord”** who sent Gideon into battle in Judges 6 and how the being said, **“The Lord is with you, O valiant warrior.”** We think of the angel of the Lord who appeared to Samson’s parents in Judges 13. They worshiped and came away from that saying, **“We will surely die, for we have seen God.”** In the same way, the angel of the Lord here appears to be some kind of appearance of God himself.

And I love that the angel of the Lord addresses Hagar by name. Up until this point, Hagar was nothing but a servant, a surrogate, a slave to be used and chased out of town, but now she is **“Hagar.”** God knows who she is. He then asks her a question, **“Where have you come from and where are you going?”** I think of that time when God said, **“Adam, where are you?”** in the Garden of Eden. That question was more for Adam’s benefit than it was for the Lord’s, and perhaps the same can be said here. She is fleeing from Sarah. But the idea is: God wants to know. God has opened the lines of communication. And isn’t it interesting that God speaks first here? As far as we know, this is not in response to any kind of prayer on Hagar’s part, but it seems that God moves first. God opens the door. God makes the first move.

We might think, “Well, what good does it do?” After all, God does not really rescue her from this situation. In fact, he sends her back into it. We need to remember that God does not overrule the consequences of sin, even if somebody else is the one who sinned. The comfort here is that God sees Hagar out in the wilderness.

Before this passage comes to an end, the Lord tells Hagar to call her son Ishmael, or literally, **“God hears.”** And what a reminder that must have been. This son is to be a constant reminder that God chased you down in the wilderness. And so every time she called her son’s name, she would remember that God does, in fact, hear. He sees us no matter where we are. The rest of the prophecy indicates that Ishmael will be a **“wild donkey of a man”** and that there would be some kind of constant conflict between him and his brothers. Most of us might be thinking that doesn’t sound too good! We know today that Arabs trace their lineage back to Ishmael. We will sometimes hear Islam referred to as one of the three “Abrahamic religions,” and the idea is that it in some sense is traced back to Abraham. We could discuss this for days, but the idea here is: There will be constant conflict between the descendants of Isaac and the descendants of Ishmael. But for Hagar, living as a slave, perhaps there was some comfort that her son would be wild, untamed, and free. And I say that because of how she reacts. She does not object to what the Lord has said here, but she gives God a new name, “You are a God who sees.” She is amazed that she has seen God, and yet she seems to have survived it! God has met her in this far-off place. And not only does God see, but he (in a sense) redeems this situation. It’s not perfect, but instead of Hagar dying in the wilderness, God promises this mother and son a future. The Messiah will not be born through Ishmael, but in spite of the mess caused by Abraham and Sarah, there is a blessing on Ishmael.

And what an encouragement this is for us: If God will meet Hagar in the wilderness, then certainly he must also see what we are going through today, no matter where we are. Even when life is tough, when we are lied to or lied about, when we are anxious, and even when we are caught up in some sin, God sees and understands. He is the God who sees, and this unique description of God comes from a pregnant slave girl on the run in the wilderness. The solution is not to run away, but the solution is to acknowledge God. As _____ read for us earlier from Psalm 33:18, **“Behold, the eye of the Lord is on those who fear Him, on those who hope for His lovingkindness.”** If God saw Hagar, then he will also see us.

III. As we come near the end of our study, I want us to go to that second passage in Genesis 21 as we bring a third idea, and the lesson from Hagar in Chapter 21 is that GOD SEES, NO MATTER HOW DESPERATE THE SITUATION.

At the end of Genesis 16, Hagar did return to serve Sarah, and Hagar did bring Ishmael into this world. And perhaps for several years, things got back to normal. For 16 years, Ishmael is Abraham's only son. Then, however, Sarah gives birth to Isaac, and as you can imagine, the situation gets more tense as Sarah now starts to worry about the inheritance, about God's promise. If Isaac is the son of promise, what about Ishmael over here – he is a teenager, about to be a man, how does he figure into this situation, and what about Hagar?

Over the past 25 years of preaching, I can say that I have been able to observe some first class, Level 1 family fights, beyond varsity, we're talking professional-level, and some of the worst of these have been over the family inheritance. Somebody dies, and there are some families that absolutely go berserk. And maybe that's a touch of what happens here. There is tension over what will happen next, and in the middle of that, right as Isaac is weaned, Abraham throws a huge party. Well, at this party, Sarah sees Ishmael mocking. Sarah loses it. She wants this slave woman kicked out of the house. I don't care what happens, but she needs to go! So, Abraham sends Hagar and Ishmael away. On the bulletin board in the entryway, I have put several pictures of a sculpture depicting Abraham's farewell to his son Ishmael, and it is a moving piece of work. You can see Abraham embracing Ishmael, Hagar is headed out, and Sarah is over to the side just scowling. Hagar and Ishmael then wander in the wilderness until the food and water is gone. It gets so bad that she steps away, and she says, ***"Do not let me see the boy die."*** Who was she talking to there? She was talking to God! She then lifts up her voice and weeps. At that point, the Bible tells us that God hears the boy and calls out to Hagar. God will make a great nation of him, and to prove it, God provides a well of water so that they are able to live.

The lesson here for us is that God sees, no matter how desperate the situation. No matter how bad it gets, we can always call on God. He always sees, even though we may not be able to see a way out, and that should be encouraging to us.

Conclusion:

As we look back at Hagar's life the main idea is that GOD SEES:

- He sees the trouble that we're in, no matter how we got there.
- He sees us no matter where we are, no matter where we may be – God is already there.
- And he sees us no matter how desperate the situation.

For the first ten or fifteen years of her life, Hagar might have thought that she was pretty much invisible, "Nobody sees me for who I really am. Nobody understands what I'm going through." But thankfully, Hagar lived long enough to understand that Yahweh is, in fact, the God who sees. I am so thankful for the young woman who requested this morning's lesson, and I am thankful for this reminder from scripture that God sees and understands. What a great reminder (especially for the young men and women of this congregation). As you grow up, as you launch out on your own, God sees – no matter how desperate, no matter where we are or how we got there, God sees!

As we close, we want to give everyone here a reminder that God loves each and every one of us. Like Ishmael, God knew each of us even before we were born. He knows our potential, and even knowing beforehand that all of us would sin, he sent his Son to buy us back, to save us from being lost. As Paul said in Romans 5:6, ***"For***

while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.” We respond to that sacrifice in faith, believing in Jesus as the Son of God, turning away from our sins, and allowing ourselves to be buried in water for the forgiveness of sins. We would love to discuss it further; we hope you will pull one of us aside after the service today. But if you are ready to obey the gospel right now, you can let us know as we sing this next song. Let’s stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com