



SESSION FOUR – HAGAR’S PRAYER

Hagar was not an Israelite. Rather, she was an Egyptian slave who served in the household of Abraham and Sarah, the couple through whom God brought about his great nation of Israel. However, this lowly status did not stop Hagar from having not one but two powerful interactions with God. Within these meaningful encounters we learn much about God’s heart for those who are oppressed and grievously mistreated. We also witness his faithful provision, even when it is undeserved.

CONTEXT

To reach Hagar’s prayer, we once again need to back up in the grand narrative of the Bible. Somewhere on the order of 600 or 700 years before Miriam witnessed and celebrated God’s great deliverance at the Red Sea, a man named Abram had followed God’s call to move his family to a new land. God had made promises to Abram which included that his descendants would be a great nation that would be blessed. God even changed Abram’s name to Abraham, which means “father of many.” The problem was, Abraham and his wife Sarah were very old, with Sarah well past her childbearing years, and they had no children. Abraham thinks of a variety of solutions, such as his nephew Lot or his servant Eliezer becoming his heirs. However, God assures Abraham that he will have a biological son (Genesis 15:4). How this could possibly be boggles Abraham’s mind.

Within the context of this confusing promise God makes to Abraham, we meet Hagar, an Egyptian woman who is Sarah’s slave. Ancient custom held it was perfectly permissible for a slave to bear a child to produce an heir when the wife had not been able to do so. With this in

mind, Abraham's wife poses a suggestion as to how to navigate the seemingly impossible conundrum and bring what God has promised into reality.

Read Genesis 16:1-16. (*Note: Sarai and Sarah are the same person; she also later has her name changed.*)

1. Provide a brief summary of each character's actions in verses 1-6:

a. Abram:

b. Sarai:

c. Hagar:

2. How did the behavioral choices of each of these three people compound the problems they were facing?

Abram	Sarai	Hagar

3. What was the outcome Sarai intended for the situation? What additional unintended consequences arose as a result?

4. What might these unintended consequences indicate about outcomes that arise when we endeavor to problem solve on our own rather than trust God?

5. Turn attention now toward verses 7-14. Provide a brief summary of what is said by each of the following:
 - a. The Angel of the LORD:

 - b. Hagar:

6. Compare what the angel tells Hagar in Exodus 16:10 with what God told Abram previously in Exodus 15:4-5. What do the similarities between the two suggest about God's character?

7. Hagar is told to name her son Ishmael, which means "God hears." What role does God hearing the plight of the oppressed play in this narrative?

8. What does the name Hagar gives to God suggest about what she believes about God?

9. Compare Hagar's experience of being seen by God to that described in Genesis 29:32 and Exodus 3:7. What links are indicated between being seen by God and his mercy?

10. What does verse 15 suggest about what Hagar did in response to the instructions she had been given by the angel?

11. Given the harsh treatment she was running from, what might it have taken for Hagar to be willing to return, and how did her encounter with God assist her in doing so?

12. Read Psalm 139. Make a list of the significant ways in which this psalm describes what it means to be heard, seen, and known by God.

THE PRAYER

Hagar's situation in Genesis 16 was a desperate one. She had been treated so harshly that she preferred to take her chances in the desert than remain in Sarai's household. The implication here should not be overlooked—she was risking a high likelihood of death in the choice that she made. Though the instructions the angel of the LORD gives to Hagar leave us scratching our heads a little bit, we can nonetheless see that she responds to the encounter with willingness to obey what she has been told to do.

As the story progresses, we learn in Genesis 21:1-7 that Abraham and Sarah do finally conceive a child, a son named Isaac. This sets the stage for another clash between Sarah and Hagar.

Read Genesis 21:8-21. The prayer we will be examining this week is tucked away in verse 16. What does verse 16 say Hagar does?

This prayer deviates from the pattern set by the previous prayers we've examined because it is not composed of poetic words. In fact, Hagar uses no words at all, but rather does little more than sob. And yet God hears her cry, alongside that of her son. Let's examine the significance of this response to a wordless prayer of desperation.

1. Note the ways in which familial strife again enters the picture by recording the actions and motives of each of the following in verses 8-14:

a. Sarah:

b. Ishmael:

c. Abraham:

2. What similarities and differences do you notice between the way the people in this family interact in Genesis 16 versus Genesis 21?

Similarities	Differences

3. Read Genesis 17:15-22. What do these verses illuminate about God's care for Hagar and her son, even though she is not the mother of the son through whom the covenant of God will be established?

4. What happens to Hagar in verses 14-16? Note what the situation indicates about her mental, physical, and spiritual state at the time.

5. What response does Hagar receive from God (communicated again through an angel) in verses 17-18? What provision does God send in verse 19?

6. What does God's provision for Hagar and her son indicate about God's character?

7. Hagar is unique, in that she receives not one but two visitations from God. She also is the only person in the Old Testament who confers a name upon God. What do these things indicate about who God is and how he views Hagar?

8. Read Romans 8:26-28. What role does the Holy Spirit play in the lives of believers today when we find ourselves in situations where we don't know what words to pray?

9. What do the Scripture passages from this week suggest Hagar believes about God? How do those beliefs shape how she approaches him in prayer?

10. Hagar's situation and God's responses to her are complicated, to be sure. What lingering questions do you have about these passages?

PRACTICE

Hagar's prayer in Genesis 21 is not actually a fully formed prayer as we think of it. Rather, it is closer to a deep, guttural cry of despair that she utters out of desperation. Yet this was sufficient to draw the attention of the God who hears and sees her. Hagar's circumstances and the situation that brought about her prayer represent a powerful statement about God's care for those who are oppressed. It also is indicative of God's faithfulness to people who have done little to be deserving of his special attention and care. What hope we can draw from seeing God protect and care for Hagar!

1. Hagar is a complicated biblical figure, in that she both is notably oppressed and contributes to her own difficulties through some personality flaws. In what ways do you personally experience similar tension between circumstances that have hurt you at the same time that you have had some role in contributing to your own difficulties?
2. Being seen and heard by God are thematic components of Hagar's story. Revisit Psalm 139. Identify at least one specific part of this psalm that relates to your own personal story and how God has heard and seen you. How does being seen, heard and known by God and loved despite your flaws contribute to your gratitude and love for him?

Hagar's story also carries with it some warning about what happens when headstrong humans seek their own way rather than God's way. It also speaks hope over the entangled and complicated situations human produce when they tamper with God's timing and relate to one another out of pride and anger. God is able to sort through the mess and provide for those who have backed themselves into corners.

1. The text of Genesis 16:1-16 leads the reader into seeing how Abram and Sarai should have waited on and trusted the LORD, instead of taking matters into their own hands. However, there are other times when the right course of action is to take a step forward in faith. (The story of David and Goliath—1 Samuel 17—is one in which we can see the benefits of faith exercised in preparing yourself and taking meaningful steps toward a goal rather than waiting.) What sources of wisdom do you have in your life to assist you in discerning which approach is right in your given situation?
2. In what ways did Hagar experience provision from God at her lowest points? In what ways have you similarly experienced his provision?
3. Reflect on a time in your life when you needed God to sort through a messy situation. What did he do to help you out of the difficulty?

Using your answers to the above questions as a guide, start a conversation with God which includes confession of how you have fallen short in following his good ways, gratitude for his provision for you even amidst hardship, and requests for wisdom and guidance for any current struggles you are facing. If you are in a space right now in which your difficulties are not easily put into words, feel free to release your distress simply by crying out to God, as Hagar did. Conclude your prayer by exploring any insights or prompting you feel the Holy Spirit is bringing to you through your study of Hagar's prayer.

Use the space provided below to write out your prayer, or to record your experience and insights gained as a result of your prayer.