

“The God Who Sees Me”

I heard a pastor describe this story in Genesis 16 as the story of an "exploited slave," a "barren wife," a "stupid husband," and a "mysterious friend." There's a sense in which it is all of that. But I've titled it, *The God Who Sees Me*. It is, most of all, a story that speaks to all of us about the God who sees us and wants us to trust in him. The high point comes at **verse 13** where Hagar, called the name of the LORD who spoke to her, “*You are a God of seeing,*” (NIV, “*who sees me*”¹) *for she said, “Truly here I have seen him who looks after me.* This name is significant because it comes at the end of a story in which people act as if God does not see or look after them. As a result, they take matters into their own hands. The reason this story is in the first book of the Bible is because this issue is a common one for us all. God has a plan for us, and he is looking after us. We need to trust him, but we're not so good at that, so we come up with plan B. Plan B is our plan for getting what we want when God doesn't do what we think he should do. This story shows us how damaging that can be and to point us to a different way to live. It tells that ***the God who sees us and cares for us will do what he has told us. So we need to trust in him and not take matters into our own hands.***

That is the lesson of Genesis 16. It takes place in two parts or scenes. First, in **verses 1-6** the scene in the camp of Abram focuses on Sarai and Hagar. Second in **verses 7-16** the scene in the wilderness focuses on the angel of the LORD and Hagar. The first scene shows us that we *need* to trust God. The second scene shows us we *can*.

So, let's look at both. In the first scene, we learn that...

I. WE NEED TO TRUST GOD TO FULFILL HIS PROMISE HIS WAY.

Genesis 16:1 begins saying, *Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children.* Childlessness can be a profound grief for many women but for Sarai it was aggravated by the fact that God had promised Abram a son. God had promised that Abram would have a son and then descendants so numerous they would be like the stars in the sky. At this point in the story, that promise was ten-years-old. That's a long time to wait. When Sarai says in **verse 2**, “*Behold now, the Lord has prevented me from bearing children;*” the suggestion is she has now reached the point or the age where she's pretty sure it's over.

Dr. Coffield says that depression occurs when a goal becomes unattainable or a loss irretrievable. Sometimes it seems that before depression takes over frustration makes a last desperate attempt to get what the heart knows it wants and thinks it needs. That's what happens here. Sarah has a slave named Hagar. What she wants to do seems unreal to our ears, and it is, but archeologists have discovered that it was culturally acceptable and legal in ancient days. Sarah could give her slave to Abram as a second, surrogate wife and the children of Hagar would belong to Sarah. So this is what they do but it was not God's plan, and it did not bring God's blessing.

Some people come across stories like this in the Bible and say, "This is like some episode of that show The Handmaid's Tale! It's creepy. How can I believe the Bible is Holy Scripture when it is full of stories like this?" You know what, it is a terrible story, but that's the point. The Bible doesn't condone this behavior. It uses it to teach us that...

A. We need to trust God to fulfill his promises his way because our hearts *can be* so unreliable.

If you think a story like this calls into question the relevance or authority of the Bible you haven't understood the purpose of the story. The Bible is not a collection of stories about wonderful people setting good examples for us all. It is the story of a good God patiently intervening in the lives of people who are not doing well or good. The characters in the Bible are flawed people who do some good things, who grasp something of God's truth but who do not rise much above their own cultural prejudices or selfish desires. One of the key lessons we should all learn from these stories is that our own hearts can be surprisingly treacherous. So we pay attention to our desires, but we can't just trust our hearts to lead us in a good or wise direction.

One lesson in this story is that there is more than one kind of slavery. We don't want to lose any of the sense of profound injustice over the slavery of Hagar, but we do need to see that spiritually and maybe you could say, emotionally Sarah is a slave as well. That's why she is so desperate. When the Bible first introduces Sarah back in **Genesis 11:30** it says: *Sarai was barren; she had no children.* We probably wouldn't be comfortable using the word "barren" today to describe a woman who was unable to bear children. To call a woman barren because she doesn't have children seems to be saying that if she can't have children, she's a failure as a human. Of course, that wasn't and isn't God's perspective. God sees the fruitfulness of a

human being, male or female, by a far different standard. But the Bible uses the language of the culture to address the issues in the culture.

Tim Keller points out that these days we are tempted to say, *“Isn't it awful that that old traditional culture is so oppressive to women that that culture would look at a woman and say you are a failure as a woman if you don't have children and a family. Thank goodness we don't live in a culture like that! But think about it – doesn't every culture come up with some standard of judgment that can become oppressive?”* I read that most scholars believe that in ancient cultures and most traditional cultures today, women don't have the body image issues or eating disorders they have in the more developed countries. In Sarai's day if you were a woman you were supposed to have children. That's how you knew you were valued. In our culture, the thing you need to be or do to prove yourself may be different but it is not nothing. In a modern individualistic culture, the culture tells you- you better be good looking, successful, smart, popular. There has never been a culture that didn't say you've got to be this or you are nothing.

Every culture does this to us. It goes deep and has the power to enslave you. Whatever you think you desperately need and without which you can not be happy has the power to enslave you. Sarai's desire to have children is part of the image of God in her as well as the culture around her. What could be more natural? But when it became a demand – something she felt she must have - it became dangerous to her and others. Look at Sarah! **Verse 2:** *so she said to Abram, "The LORD has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my maidservant; perhaps I can build a family through her."* Sarah is comfortable talking about the LORD, mentioning him. ***But there are a lot of people who are very religious right up to the point where they have to actually choose between trusting God and getting what they feel they need.*** You may believe in God but you have to learn, slowly and imperfectly but truly and sincerely to recognize that you can honestly feel the sorrow and struggle of your unmet desires but at the same time to turn deeply to God, to rely on his love and presence, to know that he sees you and to hold on to your trust in him.

We need to trust God to fulfill his promise his way because our hearts can be so unreliable. And...

B. We need to trust God to fulfill his promise His way because our plans can be so unwise.

This scheme with Hagar caused all kinds of complications and conflicts. Hagar is used. Abram is callous. Hagar has contempt for Sarai. Sarai treats Hagar so harshly and makes her so miserable she flees into the desert even though she is pregnant. It was unwise and unnecessary. When the time was right, God fulfilled the promise and hope of Abram and Sarai. He gave them a child of their own; Issac, a child of promise, a gift, and a miracle through whom he would bless the world. Later, when both the boys; Ishmael the son of Hagar and Issac the son of Sarai are growing up there is more conflict between them all. It was all heart-breaking, and the impact was longstanding.

Illustration: One time I was trying to work out a plan with a missionary from Kenya. We were trying to do something in a time frame that wasn't working. We keep pushing to make it happen. One day he said: *"Let's not make an Ishmael."* I knew what he meant. He was saying let's not force this thing and end up with something we have done, according to our wishes, and entirely by our efforts, that isn't what God wanted. That phrase has often come to mind in situations where some desire, *even* some good thing is being done, not in dependence on God but purely by human effort and willpower. *Don't make an Ishmael, wait for God to bring about his Isaac: the fulfillment of his promise.*

How do we know the difference between allowing God to work through us and trying to do God's work for him? Should Sarah have said, "If God doesn't need our help let's stop sleeping together!" From now on we're in separate tents? No. *There are three key words that can help us work on natural desires without them becoming unhealthy demands: prayer, patience, and purity.*

1st. Prayer. If we are trusting God, we will be prayerful. And we won't just be praying about what we want but about wisdom in the way we go after what we want. **James 1:5** says if you lack wisdom God ask God for it and he will give it to you if you have faith in him. *If we are honest with God, he will show us the differences between allowing him to work through us and trying to do His work for Him.*

2nd. Patience. If we are trusting God, we will be patient, not desperate. We may and should feel things deeply, but our emotions will not so dominate us that we are lost in bitterness, despair or resentment or so lost in ourselves that we mistreat and use other people. If you feel driven and desperate, you may be in danger of trying to do God's work for Him instead of deeply trusting in him.

3rd. Purity. If we are trusting God, we will behave with integrity. You don't manipulate, scheme, or shade the truth to get what you want. You live in honesty, love, vulnerability, hope, and patience. You let God guide your steps, you act responsibly, cultivate joy, do what he says, enjoy what he has given, trust his promises and let faith grow.

*What Sarah needed was not just to try harder to act better but to change her heart. And part of that, a big part of that, was to deeply surrender to trust in God. Is God a God we can trust? Yes. What the second half of the story, beginning in **verse 7** shows us is that...*

II. WE CAN TRUST GOD TO FULFILL HIS PROMISES HIS WAY.

At the end of **verse 6**, Hagar is running away from Sarai and Abram. **Verse 7.** *The angel of the LORD found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur. ⁸And he said, "Hagar, servant of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?" She said, "I am fleeing from my mistress Sarai." ⁹The angel of the LORD said to her, "Return to your mistress and submit to her." ¹⁰The angel of the LORD also said to her, "I will surely multiply your offspring so that they cannot be numbered for multitude."*

Look at what this story tells you about God. Two things: First,

A. God plans will be fulfilled in spite of our schemes.

The angel of the LORD appears and blesses Hagar. Verse 11, He says "... You will have a son. You shall name him Ishmael, for the LORD has heard of your misery. Ishmael means "God hears." Now, that is a key to what follows. To our modern ears what follow may not seem like a blessing, but it is. In **verse 12** *the angel of the Lord says: He (Ishmael) will be a wild donkey of a man; his hand will be against everyone and everyone's hand against him, and he will live in hostility toward all his brothers."*

In the Bible, a donkey was not considered a contemptible animal but it was known as a stubbornly independent animal. Hagar was a slave, and it's very likely that her greatest fear would be that she would bring a child into the world who would suffer the same indignities she had endured. So the blessing of God echoes what God has heard in Hagar's heart. She will bear a son, he will become a great nation, and he will not be tamed or domesticated. God would not allow Ishmael to be a blessing to Sarah and Abram, but he would be a

blessing to Hagar. *God has his own Sovereign plans that will be fulfilled in spite of all of our human schemes.*

Second...

B. God cares about everyday people and their struggles.

In **verse 13** Hagar gets excited over the fact that God sees her. In **verse 13** she says: "*You are the God who sees me,*" ..., "*I have now seen the One who sees me.*" She names the well *Beer Lahai Roi* which means "*the well of the living one who sees me.*" **Hagar is not an important member of the chosen family.** But God sees her.

Have you ever noticed how much children like to be seen and watched? I bet all of you, when you were children said to your moms or dads, "*Hey Mom, hey Dad, watch this! Look at me!*" We all know what it's like as a child to want to be seen. That desire to be seen seems to be part of the selfie and Instagram age too don't you think? It's a painful thing to feel that no one sees you. There is a woman named Nicole Johnson who wrote an article titled the *invisible mother*. She said she was walking her five-year-old son Jake to school one day, holding his hand, when the crossing guard asked, "*Who is that with you, young fella?*" Jake shrugged and said, *nobody*. She laughed, but it hit a tender spot. Let me read a little bit of her article.

It all began to make sense—the blank stares, the lack of response, the way one of the kids will walk into the room while I am on the phone and ask to be taken to the store. And inside I am thinking, Can't you see? I am on the phone. Obviously not. No one can see if I am on the phone or cooking or sweeping the floor or even standing on my head in the corner because no one can see me at all. I am invisible.

I wonder if Hagar felt invisible. I wonder if some of you do too. How amazing to know and believe that God sees you. Hagar didn't realize God saw her like that. But here her conversation with God is the longest conversation of any woman, and almost any man, in the whole of the Old Testament. Hagar is the only woman in the Bible who gives God a name and is called by name by God. God, the creator of the universe, the stars and the seas is mighty and holy and good and beautiful. If you have a God like and you come to know that *he* sees and hears you, then that is so powerful because it means that God knows and cares for you. So you can trust in him.

The fascinating thing is that this revelation of the truth that God saw her gave Hagar the courage to do what Sarah failed to do. She chooses to trust God to fulfill his promise to her his way and to obey even though what he tells her to do is very difficult. He told her to go back and submit to Sarah. Can you imagine that? Even though Hagar has been so mistreated God doesn't allow her to dissolve into victimhood. He gives her a task to perform, and it is hard. Where's the justice, the fairness, in that? But she did it. ***What happens is that in time (Genesis 21 tells the rest of the story) Sarah herself goes to Abram and asks him to send Hagar and her son away.*** So Hagar leaves but this time she isn't a pregnant fugitive slave with an uncertain future looking over her shoulder. She is a free woman with a healthy boy and God meets her again and assures her of His plan and purpose for her life. ***In the end, God gives Hagar more than she dreamed possible but to receive it and enjoy it; she had to trust him to fulfill his promise his way.*** That's the lesson of this strange story and these two women, Sarai and Hagar. ***The God who sees you and cares for you will do what he has told you. So trust in him.***

CONCLUSION

As the story of the Bible unfolds one of the most persistent principles revealed is that God fulfills his promises and he often does so in unexpected and surprising ways. God fulfilled his promise to Abram and Sarah, and in his time he gave them a child of promise through a miraculous birth. God did create a great nation from imperfect people, and in his time he kept his promise to bless the world through them. He sends Jesus, God in human flesh, to be born miraculously for us. Later in the New Testament book of Galatians the apostle Paul uses the story of Sarah and Hagar to teach us that we are not saved by our works or any human efforts but only by a gift of God's grace. The salvation of your soul is as much a gift of God's pure grace as the birth of Issac would be for Abram and Sarai. The gift God promises to freely, give to those who trust in him cannot be earned or engineered by any human effort. You have to trust God to give you his grace his way.

Faith is how we begin with God and how we go on with God every step of the way. Where are you tempted to be desperate, to make an Ishmael? There is something you want, maybe it is a good thing, but you want it in the worst way. Can you hand that thing and that desire over to God? Take your hands off, fold them in prayer, lift them to God

and say, *"Lord, I give this to you. I will do my part faithfully, but I will not try to force this thing. I will trust in you."*

Amen

¹ Waltke notes: "This sentence name is "You are El-roi" (lit., "God of my seeing"). The name is a pun meaning "the God who sees me" 9so NIV, which fits the context, and/or "the God I see," which fits here explanation.