

The Book of Genesis, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 11: Hagar and the Covenant of Circumcision

Genesis 16:1-17:27

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This passage covers the painful episode of Hagar and Ishmael and the establishing of circumcision as the covenant sign. Doctrinally, it teaches the danger of running ahead of God and trying to secure His promises by fleshly schemes, the tender truth that God sees and cares for the afflicted and overlooked, the power of God Almighty to do the impossible, the new identity God grants His people, and the meaning of the covenant sign. It also carries a rich New Testament fulfillment: circumcision points to the circumcision of the heart and to baptism, and the contrast between Hagar's son and Sarah's son becomes Paul's picture of flesh versus promise, law versus the freedom of those born of the Spirit.

Teach the covenant sign with care toward its fulfillment. Circumcision marked out the old covenant people in the flesh; the New Testament shows that what it pointed to is a circumcision 'made without hands,' the putting off of the old self, accomplished in Christ and signified in baptism, where believers are buried and raised with Him (Colossians 2:11-12). Belonging to God now is not by physical descent or an outward mark but by faith in Christ and the new birth. In Galatians 4, Paul reads Hagar and Sarah as a picture: the child born 'according to the flesh' and the child born 'through promise,' concluding that believers, like Isaac, are 'children of promise,' born of the Spirit and free. Use this to guard against grounding covenant standing in flesh or law rather than in Christ.

Formationally, the passage calls students to stop scheming and start trusting God's timing, to rest in being seen and known by God in their obscurity and pain, to believe God's power for the impossible, and to live out of the new identity God gives rather than their past. Lead them, finally, to the new covenant in Christ, in which we are renamed His own and marked as His through faith and baptism into Him.

Question 1

Student Question:

Sarai and Abram, weary of waiting, tried to secure God's promise through a human scheme involving Hagar, and it brought conflict and heartache (16:1-6). What does this teach us about the danger of running ahead of God and trying to fulfill His promises by our own fleshly means?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The Hagar episode begins with impatience. Ten years after the promise, Sarai concludes that God needs help and proposes a culturally acceptable workaround: let Abram father a child

through her servant Hagar. The plan was reasonable by ancient custom, but it was a failure of faith, an attempt to fulfill God's promise by human means rather than wait on God's power.

Notice the echo of the fall. 'Abram listened to the voice of his wife,' just as Adam 'listened to the voice' of Eve. When we stop trusting God's word and act on our own schemes, even sincere ones, we repeat the old pattern of taking control out of God's hands.

Trace the consequences, because they are severe and lasting. Hagar's pregnancy breeds contempt and conflict; the household fractures; a pregnant woman flees into the desert; and the descendants of Ishmael and Isaac will be in tension for generations. The fleshly shortcut created a wound that did not heal quickly. Running ahead of God rarely costs nothing.

Help students see the heart of the failure: a refusal to wait. God's promises operate on God's timetable, and faith is willing to wait for Him to act in His way and time. The flesh says, 'Do something now'; faith says, 'Wait for God.' Abram and Sarai's scheme is a warning that our impatience can complicate what God intends to accomplish by grace.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The danger of running ahead of God and fulfilling His promises by fleshly means.
- Echoes of the fall in 'listening to the voice' and seizing control.
- The lasting consequences of faithless shortcuts.
- Faith as willingness to wait on God's timing and power.

Discussion Prompts

- Why was Sarai's plan, sensible as it seemed, a failure of faith?
- What consequences flowed from running ahead of God?
- How does impatience tempt us to 'help God' in fleshly ways?

Question 2

Student Question:

Where are you most tempted to take matters into your own hands rather than wait on God's timing? What "sensible plan" might actually be a failure to trust Him?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question applies the scheme of Hagar to the student's own life. We all face the gap between God's promise and its fulfillment, and in that gap the temptation to take control is strong. We tell ourselves we are just being responsible, but sometimes our 'sensible plan' is really a refusal to trust.

Help students discern the difference between faithful action and faithless control. God does call us to act, to work, to make decisions; waiting on God is not passivity. The issue is whether our

action flows from trust in God or from a determination to secure the outcome ourselves, by any means, on our own schedule.

Name the common arenas: forcing a relationship, manipulating circumstances, compromising to get what we want sooner, anxious overwork driven by distrust, taking shortcuts that bend our integrity. The flesh is endlessly resourceful in 'helping God.'

Invite honest reflection: where is the student tempted to scheme rather than trust, and what would patient, faith-filled waiting (which is not the same as doing nothing) look like in that situation?

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The temptation to control outcomes rather than trust God's timing.
- Distinguishing faithful action from faithless control.
- Common fleshly shortcuts: manipulation, compromise, anxious overwork.
- Patient waiting that is active trust, not passivity.

Discussion Prompts

- Where are you most tempted to take matters into your own hands?
- What 'sensible plan' of yours might actually be distrust of God?
- What would faithful, patient waiting look like there?

Question 3

Student Question:

When Hagar, an afflicted and outcast slave woman, fled to the wilderness, the angel of the Lord sought her out and she named God "You are a God who sees me" (16:7-13). What does this reveal about God's character and His care for the overlooked and the suffering?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The wilderness scene with Hagar is one of the tenderest in Genesis. Hagar is a nobody by the world's reckoning: a foreign slave woman, used and then despised, now a pregnant runaway likely to die in the desert. And the angel of the Lord seeks her out, speaks to her by name, and gives her a promise. God notices the one everyone else overlooked.

Hagar's response gives God a name found nowhere else in Scripture: 'You are a God who sees me' (El Roi). She is overwhelmed not mainly by being rescued but by being seen, truly noticed and known by God. In a story dominated by great patriarchs and grand promises, God stops for a weeping slave girl.

Draw out what this reveals about God's character. He is not only the God of the powerful and the prominent; He is the God who sees the afflicted, the outcast, the forgotten. 'The Lord looks

down from heaven; he sees all the children of man' (Psalm 33:13–14). No one is beneath His notice or beyond His care.

This is profoundly good news for the overlooked. Whatever our status in the eyes of others, we are seen by God. He knows our names, our tears, and our circumstances, and He draws near to the lowly. The God who found Hagar finds us.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's tender care for the overlooked, afflicted, and outcast.
- 'The God who sees me' (El Roi): being truly seen and known by God.
- God's attention to the lowly, not only the powerful (Psalm 33:13–14).
- The dignity of every person in God's sight.

Discussion Prompts

- What does it reveal about God that He sought out Hagar?
- Why was Hagar so moved by being 'seen' by God?
- How does this truth speak to those who feel overlooked?

Question 4

Student Question:

Do you really believe that God sees you, even in your obscurity, your loneliness, or your pain? How does the truth that you are seen and known by God speak to where you are right now?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question presses the comfort of being seen into the student's own experience. Many people carry a deep sense of being unseen: overlooked at work, taken for granted at home, invisible in a crowd, forgotten in their pain. Hagar's story speaks directly to that ache.

Help students personalize the truth. The God who saw Hagar in the wilderness sees them in their own desert places, the lonely hours, the unnoticed faithfulness, the private grief. Jesus said even the hairs of our head are numbered (Matthew 10:30); nothing about us escapes His loving attention.

Address the difference it makes. To believe we are seen by God reframes our obscurity. The faithfulness no one notices is noticed by God; the tears no one counts are counted by Him. We do not need the world's recognition when we know the gaze of our Father is upon us.

Invite a concrete application: where does the student feel most unseen, and what would change if they truly lived in the awareness that God sees them there?

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Personalizing the truth that God sees us in our obscurity and pain.
- God's loving attention to our unnoticed faithfulness and private grief (Matthew 10:30).
- Being seen by God reframing our need for human recognition.
- Living in the awareness of God's gaze.

Discussion Prompts

- Where do you most feel unseen or forgotten?
- How does it change things to know God sees you there?
- What would living in the awareness of God's gaze look like for you?

Question 5

Student Question:

In chapter seventeen God reveals Himself as "God Almighty" (El Shaddai) and renews the covenant, promising a son to elderly Abraham and Sarah (17:1-8, 15-16). What does this name of God, and this impossible promise, teach us about His power to accomplish what seems impossible to us?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

In chapter seventeen, after thirteen more years of silence, God appears and reveals Himself with a new name: 'I am God Almighty' (El Shaddai). The name emphasizes God's all-sufficient power, His ability to accomplish what is humanly impossible. He attaches it to a staggering promise: a son for a hundred-year-old man and a ninety-year-old woman.

Help students feel the impossibility. Abraham laughs (17:17); Sarah will laugh too (18:12). Humanly speaking, the promise is absurd. That is precisely the point. God's power is most clearly displayed where human ability has run out. Paul says Abraham was 'fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised' (Romans 4:21).

Draw out the doctrine: God is able. He is not limited by our limitations, not stumped by our impossibilities. 'Is anything too hard for the Lord?' (Genesis 18:14). The God who brings life from a barren womb is the God who brings life from the dead, and finally raised Christ from the grave.

This grounds faith in something solid: not in the likelihood of our circumstances but in the power and faithfulness of God. When the promise seems impossible, faith looks not at the obstacle but at the One who is called God Almighty.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God Almighty (El Shaddai): His all-sufficient power to do the impossible.
- God's power displayed where human ability has run out (Romans 4:21).
- 'Is anything too hard for the Lord?' (Genesis 18:14).

- Faith grounded in God's power and faithfulness, not in circumstances.

Discussion Prompts

- What does the name 'God Almighty' emphasize about God?
- Why does God so often act where human ability has run out?
- How does knowing God's power strengthen faith for the impossible?

Question 6

Student Question:

Where do you need to trust God's power in a situation that seems impossible, a promise, a prayer, or a hope that looks beyond all reasonable expectation? How does knowing God as "God Almighty" strengthen your faith there?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question invites students to trust God's power in their own impossible situations. Each person likely carries some hope, prayer, or promise that looks beyond all reasonable expectation: a wayward child, a broken relationship, a stubborn sin, a long-unanswered prayer, a circumstance that seems past hope.

Help students bring the name 'God Almighty' to bear on that specific situation. The issue is not whether the thing is possible for us (it may not be) but whether it is possible for God. Faith does not deny the difficulty; it remembers the power of the One who promised.

Guard against presumption while encouraging faith. To trust God's power is not to claim He will do whatever we wish, but to rest in the assurance that nothing is too hard for Him and that He will keep every promise He has actually made. Faith trusts God's power and submits to His wisdom.

Invite a concrete step: the impossible-seeming situation the student most needs to entrust to God Almighty, and a renewed commitment to pray and trust rather than despair.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Trusting God's power in our own impossible situations.
- Faith remembering God's power rather than denying the difficulty.
- Trusting God's power while submitting to His wisdom (not presumption).
- Praying and trusting rather than despairing.

Discussion Prompts

- What situation in your life seems impossible right now?
- How does the name 'God Almighty' speak to that situation?

- What would trusting God's power, rather than despairing, look like there?

Question 7

Student Question:

God changed Abram's name to Abraham ("father of a multitude") and Sarai's to Sarah, giving them new identities grounded in His promise before that promise was fulfilled (17:5, 15). What does this teach us about living out of the identity God gives us rather than our past or our circumstances?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

God marks the renewal of the covenant by changing names. Abram ('exalted father') becomes Abraham ('father of a multitude'), and Sarai becomes Sarah ('princess'). Strikingly, God gives these new identities before the promise is fulfilled; Abraham is called 'father of a multitude' while still childless by Sarah. He is to live now as who God's promise says he is.

Draw out the principle: identity rooted in God's calling, not in present circumstances or past failures. Every time someone said 'Abraham,' they declared God's promise. The new name was a daily summons to faith, a reminder that God had defined his future.

Connect this to the believer's identity in Christ. In the New Testament, those who come to Christ receive a new identity: a child of God, a new creation, a saint, a member of His body. We are called to live out of who God says we are, not who our past or our shame says we are. 'If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation' (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Help students see this is not pretending. God's renaming is grounded in His promise and power, not in wishful thinking. We do not manufacture a new identity; we receive one from God and learn, by faith, to live according to it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Identity grounded in God's calling, not in circumstances or past.
- Living now as who God's promise says we are.
- The believer's new identity in Christ: child of God, new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17).
- Receiving identity from God rather than manufacturing it.

Discussion Prompts

- Why did God give new names before the promise was fulfilled?
- What new identity does God give those who come to Christ?
- What does it mean to live out of God's naming rather than your past?

Question 8

Student Question:

What old identity, label, or self-image do you most need to let go of in order to live as the person God says you are in Christ? Where are you still defined by your past rather than by God's calling?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question presses the matter of identity into the student's heart. Many believers, though made new in Christ, still live out of an old identity: defined by a past failure, a label others have given them, a shame they cannot shake, a role they have outgrown. The old name still rings louder than the new.

Help students name the specific old identity. It may be 'failure,' 'unwanted,' 'addict,' 'the one who always lets people down,' or a label tied to a past sin. These old names contradict who God says we are in Christ, yet we often believe them more readily than His word.

Offer the path to change. We learn to live in our new identity by hearing and believing what God says about us in Scripture, by letting His word be louder than the old voices, and by acting in line with who we now are. Sanctification is in large part becoming, in practice, who we already are in Christ.

Invite a concrete step: the old label the student most needs to release, the truth from God's word that replaces it, and one way to live this week as the person God says they are.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Living out of an old identity rather than our identity in Christ.
- Naming the specific old labels that contradict God's word.
- Letting God's word be louder than the old voices.
- Becoming in practice who we already are in Christ.

Discussion Prompts

- What old label or self-image still defines you?
- What does God say about you in Christ that replaces it?
- How can you live this week as the person God says you are?

Question 9**Student Question:**

God gave circumcision as the sign of the covenant (17:9–14). How does the New Testament show this sign fulfilled in Christ, in the "circumcision of the heart" and in baptism (Colossians 2:11–12; Romans 2:28–29), and what does the contrast between Hagar's son and Sarah's son teach us about belonging to God by promise rather than by the flesh (Galatians 4:21–31)?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinal high point, drawing the covenant sign into its New Testament fulfillment. God gives circumcision as the sign of the covenant, a permanent mark in the flesh of every male, signifying that this people belongs to God and lives by His covenant (17:9–14). For Israel it was the entry sign into the covenant community.

But the prophets and apostles show that the outward sign always pointed to something deeper: a circumcision of the heart. Moses called Israel to ‘circumcise the foreskin of your heart’ (Deuteronomy 10:16), and Paul says, ‘real circumcision is a matter of the heart, by the Spirit’ (Romans 2:28–29). The cutting away of the flesh pictured the cutting away of sin and the dedication of the whole person to God. The sign was never meant to be merely physical.

Then show the fulfillment in Christ and baptism. Paul writes that in Christ believers were circumcised ‘with a circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through faith’ (Colossians 2:11–12). The new covenant sign is not a cut in the flesh but baptism into Christ, where the old self is put off and we are raised to new life. Belonging to God now is by faith in Christ and the new birth, not by physical descent or an external mark. Teach this without reading baptism anachronistically into Abraham’s day; the connection is the New Testament’s own.

Now bring in the contrast between the two sons, which Paul develops in Galatians 4. Ishmael was born ‘according to the flesh,’ the product of Abraham and Sarah’s scheming; Isaac was born ‘through promise,’ by God’s power. Paul reads this as a picture: there are children of the flesh and children of promise, those who seek standing by the law and the flesh, and those who are born of the Spirit and free. ‘Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise’ (Galatians 4:28). The church, born of the Spirit, is the family of promise.

Land the application. We do not belong to God by heritage, ritual, or fleshly effort, but by being children of promise, born again through faith in Christ and united with Him in baptism. This guards against every attempt to ground our standing with God in physical descent, external rites performed without faith, or our own works. We are Abraham’s true children by faith, marked not by a cut in the flesh but by a heart circumcised by the Spirit and a life buried and raised with Christ.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Circumcision as the sign of the old covenant, marking belonging to God (Genesis 17:9–14).
- The sign always pointing to circumcision of the heart (Deuteronomy 10:16; Romans 2:28–29).
- Fulfillment in Christ and baptism: the circumcision made without hands, buried and raised with Him (Colossians 2:11–12).
- Belonging to God by faith in Christ and the new birth, not physical descent or external rite.

- The two sons as flesh versus promise; the church as children of promise born of the Spirit (Galatians 4:21–31).
- Guarding against grounding our standing with God in heritage, ritual, or fleshly effort.

Discussion Prompts

- What did circumcision signify, and what did it always point toward?
- How does the New Testament connect that sign to baptism into Christ?
- What does the contrast between Ishmael and Isaac teach about belonging to God?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back over the whole passage. Name one specific way God is calling you to stop scheming and start trusting, to live as one who is seen by God and renamed by His grace.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Use this capstone to bring the passage's call to a personal point. We have seen the mess our scheming makes, the tenderness of the God who sees, the power of God Almighty, the new identity He grants, and the covenant sign fulfilled in Christ. The question is what God is forming in this particular student.

Press for the specific. For one it is laying down a scheme and trusting God's timing; for another, resting in being seen by God in their obscurity; for another, trusting God's power for an impossible situation; for another, living out of their new identity in Christ rather than an old label.

Close with the grace that runs through the whole passage. Despite Abraham and Sarah's failure, God kept His promise. Despite our schemes, God's grace pursues us, sees us, renames us, and marks us as His own in Christ. To be formed by this passage is to stop striving in the flesh and to rest as a child of promise, seen, renamed, and held by the God for whom nothing is too hard.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Laying down our schemes to trust God's timing.
- Resting in being seen and renamed by God's grace.
- Trusting God's power for the impossible.
- Living as children of promise, marked as God's own in Christ.

Discussion Prompts

- What scheme is God calling you to lay down in order to trust Him?
- How does being 'seen' and 'renamed' by God change how you live?
- What does it mean for you to rest as a child of promise this week?