

The Book of Genesis

Lesson 11: Hagar and the Covenant of Circumcision -- Genesis 16:1–17:27

Ten years have passed since God promised Abram a son, and still Sarai's arms are empty. Ten years of watching the moon turn and the calendar fill and nothing change. And waiting that long does something to a person. It wears down trust and whispers that maybe God needs a little help. So Sarai makes a plan, a perfectly sensible plan by the customs of her day: give her servant Hagar to Abram, and let the child count as her own. Abram listens to the voice of his wife, just as Adam once listened to his, and a scheme is set in motion that will bring grief for generations.

It does not go the way they imagined. Hagar conceives, and the household fractures: contempt on one side, harshness on the other, until the pregnant slave woman runs away into the wilderness to die. And there, by a spring in the desert, the most unexpected thing happens. The angel of the Lord finds her, this nobody, this runaway, this used and discarded woman, and speaks to her by name. She is so undone by being seen that she gives God a name of her own: "You are a God who sees me." In a story about a great man and his promises, God stops to notice a weeping slave girl in the sand. That is the kind of God He is.

Then thirteen more silent years go by, and God appears again, this time announcing Himself with a new name: "I am God Almighty." El Shaddai. The God for whom nothing is too hard. And He does something wonderful: He changes their names. Abram, "exalted father," becomes Abraham, "father of a multitude," though he still has no child by Sarai. Sarai becomes Sarah, a princess who will be the mother of nations. God renames them according to a future only He can see, and calls them to live now as who His promise says they are.

And He gives them a sign to carry in their bodies: circumcision, a mark cut into the flesh of every male, a permanent reminder that this people belongs to God and lives by His covenant. Centuries later the New Testament will tell us what that outward sign was always pointing toward: a circumcision "made without hands," a cutting away of the old self, fulfilled in Christ and pictured now in baptism, where we are buried with Him and raised to new life. Read this passage and watch two truths come together: our impatient schemes make a mess, and God's patient grace keeps His word anyway, sees the overlooked, renames the hopeless, and marks out a people for Himself.

Group Discussion: After waiting years for the promised child, Sarai and Abram tried to bring it about their own way, through Hagar (16:1–4). Why is it so tempting to "help God" by taking matters into our own hands, and what were the consequences when they did?

Personal Reflection: When Hagar fled into the wilderness, alone and afflicted, God found her and she called Him "a God who sees me" (16:13). Where in your life do you feel unseen, overlooked, or forgotten? How would it change things to truly believe that God sees you right there?

Read Genesis 16:1–17:27

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?
6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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)?
10. 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.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Galatians 4:21–31, Hagar and Sarah, the child of flesh and the child of promise; Colossians 2:11–12, the circumcision of Christ and burial with Him in baptism; Romans 2:28–29, the circumcision of the heart by the Spirit; Romans 4:18–22, Abraham fully convinced that God was able to do what He promised; Hebrews 6:13–15, Abraham patiently waiting and obtaining the promise.