

GENESIS 16; 21:8–21

Hagar: The God Who Sees the Overlooked

Lesson at a glance

Hagar is brief in the text but immense in pastoral power. She is an Egyptian slave, twice driven into the wilderness, who becomes the very first person in Scripture to give God a name: El Roi, the God who sees me. The lesson walks through her use in Sarai's household, her first encounter with the angel of the LORD, her expulsion in Genesis 21, and the well God opened in her sight. It closes by tying her story to the way Jesus repeatedly notices the people the world overlooks.

Goals for this session

First, that any woman who has felt invisible would hear, deep in her heart, that she is not invisible to God.

Second, that the group would recognize the particular ways women wound each other, and would be moved to compassion instead of comparison.

Third, that each woman would learn to look for the wells God has already provided in her wilderness, the provision that may be present even when her eyes are not yet open to see it.

Fourth, that the group would identify at least one "Hagar" in her own circle (someone the world has written off) and take a concrete step toward her this week.

Preparing to lead

Do the lesson yourself slowly, with your Bible open. Read Genesis 16 and 21:8 to 21 aloud earlier in the week. Pray through Psalm 139 with each woman in your group in mind.

Look around your congregation and community for a Hagar of your own: a single mother, an elderly widow, an immigrant woman, a woman whose situation makes her hard to befriend. Decide ahead of time how you will reach out to her this week. It is hard to teach the lesson honestly if you are not willing to live it.

Sensitive topics in this lesson

Feeling invisible (questions 1, 14). Many women in our congregations are quietly carrying the ache of not being seen. Let the lesson speak. Don't try to fix it. The fixing is the Lord's work; your work is to make room for the truth that He does see them.

Single motherhood and abandonment (questions 8 to 11). The wilderness scene in chapter 21 will land hard for any woman who has been left to raise children alone. Be gentle. The promise is not that God will remove the wilderness, but that He provides in it.

Past abuse or use by other people (questions 2, 3). Hagar was given no voice in the decisions made about her body. Some women in your group may identify more than they can say aloud. Be ready for that, and do not push.

Women wounding women (question 3, the For Thought and Discussion box). This is often more painful than wounds from men. Lead it carefully. The point is not to surface every old grievance, but to recognize the pattern and let the gospel address it (Ephesians 4:31 to 32).

Suggested 60- to 75-minute schedule

Five minutes: welcome, get the group settled.

Five minutes: open in prayer. Read Genesis 16:7 to 13 aloud.

Five to ten minutes: warm-up. Ask each woman to recall a time she felt overlooked or invisible. One sentence each. This sets the table for the rest of the discussion.

Thirty-five to forty minutes: discussion. Choose six or seven questions in advance.

Five to ten minutes: "Your response" reflection.

Five minutes: closing prayer.

Discussion priorities

Make sure these are among the questions you discuss: 4 (God's two questions to her), 6 (El Roi), 10 (God hears the boy's voice), 11 (the well she could not see), 12 and 13 (Hagar and the gospel), and 14 (your response).

Notes on key questions

Question 3. Both women fail each other here. Sarai uses Hagar; Hagar despises Sarai once she has the upper hand. Help the group see that the failure is mutual and very human. The discussion should not become "team Sarai" against "team Hagar." The point of the For Thought and Discussion box is to look at our own role in the women-wounding-women pattern, not to score points.

Question 4. The angel of the LORD asks Hagar two questions, by name. The two questions ("Where have you come from?" and "Where are you going?") are still the best questions to ask any of us when we are running from something. Linger here. Ask each woman to silently apply them to her own life.

Question 5. The promise to Ishmael in 16:10 to 12 is mixed: many descendants, but a difficult life. God's promises are not always comfortable. Faith is not the assurance that the road will be smooth; it is the assurance that He is with us on the road we have.

Question 6. El Roi ("the God who sees me") is the first divine name given by a human being in the Bible, and it comes from the lips of a foreign, female slave. Sit with that for a moment in the group. The God of Abraham is not just the God of patriarchs and prophets; He is the God of slaves in the desert. The same God Jesus would later reveal in His own way (John 4 is a beautiful echo of this scene).

Question 8. God's word to Abraham in 21:12 to 13 is striking. Even when Sarah's demand is harsh, God is at work. He sees Hagar. He promises Ishmael a future. Family conflict does not interrupt His sovereign care; He works through it. This is encouragement for women in long-term family pain.

Question 10. "God heard the voice of the boy" (21:17) is one of the tenderest verses in the Old Testament. Note that the text does not say God heard the boy's prayer. It says God heard his voice. The cry of a dying child reaches God whether the child knows how to pray or not. The cry of any of us reaches Him in the same way (Romans 8:26).

Question 11. God did not create a new well; He opened her eyes to a well that was already there. Many of God's provisions are like that. We cry out for new mercy and miss the mercy already around us. Encourage the women to ask the Lord to open their eyes to provision they have stopped seeing.

Questions 12 and 13. Hagar's story is the gospel in advance. The God of the covenant people stops to find a non-covenant slave girl, name her, hear her, and provide for her son. Jesus' earthly ministry is filled with the same kind of interruptions (Mark 5; Luke 7; Luke 13; John 4). El Roi and Jesus are the same God. Make sure the women hear this plainly.

Question 14. Personal response. Give the women time to write before sharing. Some women may name an area of life where they have stopped believing they are seen. After sharing, pray Psalm 139:1 to 6 over the group by name.

About the Study Skills in this lesson

Two Study Skills appear in this lesson. The first, Asking Who, What, Where, When, Why, and How, is the most basic and the most useful question habit in Bible study. Encourage every woman to ask these of every paragraph she reads, all twelve weeks. The second, Reading from the Outsider's Perspective, opens up a vein in Scripture we sometimes miss when we read only from the inside of the covenant family. Both skills will serve the women for the rest of their lives.

A suggested closing prayer

Pray your own prayer. A sample, if you would like one:

"Father, we thank You that You are El Roi, the God who sees. Thank You for finding Hagar in the wilderness, for calling her by name, for hearing the voice of her boy, for opening her eyes to a well she

could not see. We thank You that Your Son had the same eyes for the overlooked of His own day, and that the same eyes are on us tonight. For each woman in this room who has felt invisible, make Yourself near. Open our eyes to the wells already in our wilderness. And teach us, this week, to be Your eyes and Your hands to a Hagar in our own circle. In the name of the Lord Jesus we pray. Amen."

Looking ahead to Lesson 4

Next week is Rahab, Joshua 2 and 6:17 to 25. Encourage the women to read those passages, along with Matthew 1:5, Hebrews 11:31, and James 2:25. Rahab's story will continue what Hagar's begins: God's habit of reaching for the people the world has written off.