

## *Lesson Three*

# **GENESIS 16; 21:8-21**

## **Hagar: The God Who Sees the Overlooked**

She has no last name. No family tree. No songs written about her. She appears in Genesis as someone else's solution and is dismissed as someone else's problem. She is a slave, a foreigner, a single mother in a wilderness with an empty water skin and a son she fully expects to bury before sundown. If anyone in Scripture had a right to feel invisible, it is Hagar.

And yet, astonishingly, Hagar becomes the very first person in the Bible to give God a name. Not a king. Not a patriarch. Not a priest. A used and discarded Egyptian slave girl, bent over a wilderness spring, looks up and calls Him El Roi, "the God who sees me." Long before there is a temple, a tabernacle, or a covenant nation, there is a runaway who discovers that no one is ever lost to God's attention.

Read Genesis 16 and Genesis 21:8 to 21 carefully this week. Hagar's story is short, but it carries one of the tenderest truths in Scripture. There is no wilderness so remote that God cannot find you in it, and no person so unimportant that He does not see her.

### **First impressions**

Notice that Genesis tells Hagar's story twice, in chapter 16 and again in chapter 21. The two wilderness scenes echo each other on purpose. A desperate flight, a meeting with God, a divine provision, and a promise about her son occur in both. The Hebrew narrator is showing us that God does not rescue Hagar once and then forget her. He keeps coming back.

1.
  - a. Read Genesis 16 and Genesis 21:8 to 21. What strikes you most about Hagar at first reading?
  - b. How is she treated by Sarah? By Abraham? By God?

**For Further Study:** Galatians 4:21 to 31 takes the Sarah and Hagar story and turns it into a picture of two covenants, flesh versus promise, slavery versus freedom. Skim that passage now. Notice how Paul handles Hagar pastorally even as he uses her story theologically.

### **Used and resented (16:1-6)**

Hagar is identified in 16:1 as Sarai's Egyptian maidservant. She may have entered Sarai's household after the events of Genesis 12:16, when Pharaoh gave Abram livestock and male and female servants. If so, the very household that took her from Egypt is the household that will now use her, drive her away, and (in chapter 21) drive her away again. The Bible does not soften this. It simply tells the truth, and lets God's character shine against the dark backdrop of human cruelty.

2. Re-read 16:1 to 3. Hagar is part of someone else's plan. She is given no voice in the decision. What does this passage say (and not say) about her?
3.
  - a. 16:4 says that when Hagar conceived, "her mistress was despised in her eyes." What happens between the two women, and why?
  - b. 16:6 records that Sarai "dealt harshly with her" and Hagar fled. Both women fail each other here. What might compassion have looked like for either of them in this moment?

**For Thought and Discussion:** Women have a particular way of wounding each other. Where in your own life have you been on the giving or receiving end of that kind of wound? What would the gospel ask of you in those relationships (Ephesians 4:31 to 32)?

## Found by the God who sees (16:7–14)

The figure identified as "the angel of the LORD" appears at key moments throughout the Old Testament (Genesis 16; 22:11 to 18; Exodus 3:2 to 6; Judges 6:11 to 24; 13:3 to 22). What is striking about Him is that He often speaks in the first person as God and is worshiped as God (compare 16:13). Many careful students of Scripture have therefore understood Him to be a unique manifestation of God's presence, and in some passages a foreshadowing of the Son who would later be revealed in the flesh (John 1:18; Hebrews 1:1 to 3). Whatever else we say, what matters here is the simple, staggering fact that God Himself comes personally to find a runaway slave.

**Study Skill, Asking Who, What, Where, When, Why, and How:** The simplest and most useful Bible study skill is asking the right questions of every paragraph. Who is speaking? Who is being addressed? What is happening? Where is it taking place, and when? Why is the event recorded, and how does it advance the story? Most of what we miss in Scripture we miss because we read too quickly to ask. As you study Hagar, slow down and ask these questions about 16:7 to 14. The answers are often hiding in plain sight.

4.
  - a. Hagar flees into the wilderness on the road back toward Egypt, back toward her old life. The angel of the LORD finds her at a spring of water. What two questions does He ask her in 16:8?

- b. Notice that He asks her by name. Why does that matter?
  - c. How are those two questions still good questions for us when we are running from something?
- 5.
  - a. The angel sends her back, but not without a promise. What does He promise her in 16:10 to 12?
  - b. What is encouraging about the promise? What is sober about it?
- 6.
  - a. Read 16:13 slowly. Hagar gives God a name: El Roi, "the God who sees me." What does she mean by it?
  - b. Why is it significant that the first person in Scripture to name God is a foreign, mistreated, female slave?

**Optional Application:** Find a quiet moment this week to read Psalm 139 slowly. Underline every line that tells you God sees you. Then ask Him to make that truth real to you in a specific area of your life where you have felt invisible.

## **Cast out (21:8–14)**

Years pass between Genesis 16 and Genesis 21. Isaac is born. Ishmael is now a teenager, somewhere between fourteen and seventeen years old. The trouble at the weaning party in 21:9 has been read in many ways. Most Jewish translators understood the Hebrew verb as "mocking" or "making sport of" Isaac, perhaps in a deliberate or jealous way. Paul will later refer to this incident as a form of persecution (Galatians 4:29). Whatever exactly happened, Sarah saw a threat to her son and refused to let it stand.

- 7. Read 21:8 to 9. What happens at the weaning celebration?

8.
  - a. In 21:10, Sarah demands that Hagar and Ishmael be sent away. How does Abraham feel about this (21:11)?
  - b. What does God say to Abraham about it in 21:12 to 13? What does this reveal about how God can be sovereignly at work even in deeply painful family conflicts?

## God provides in the wilderness (21:15–21)

9. Read 21:15 to 16. Hagar runs out of water and lays Ishmael under a bush, then walks a bowshot away because she cannot bear to watch him die. What is your heart's response to that scene?

21:17 says, "God heard the voice of the boy." The Hebrew is literally arresting: not God listened to the boy's prayer, just God heard the boy. Ishmael's name itself means "God hears." Even in the worst hour of his life, before he understands anything about his own future, his name is being fulfilled. That fact alone has comforted countless mothers ever since.

10. 21:17 says, "God heard the voice of the boy." What does this tell you about God's heart for crying children?
11.
  - a. In 21:19, God opens Hagar's eyes and she sees a well. Was the well always there? What does it mean that her eyes had to be opened to see it?
  - b. Where in your own life might God's provision be present but, just now, unseen?

**For Thought and Discussion:** There is a difference between God removing the wilderness and God providing water in it. Why does He so often choose the second?

## Hagar and the gospel

**Study Skill, Reading from the Outsider's Perspective:** We often read the Bible from inside the covenant family, identifying with Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, and so on. But many passages of Scripture take time to record the experience of outsiders, people on the edges of the covenant story: Hagar, Melchizedek, Rahab, Ruth, the Syrophoenician woman, the centurion at the cross. Try reading those passages from the outsider's point of view, and notice how

God repeatedly chooses to find, name, and bless the very people His covenant people sometimes overlook. This is how the door opens for all of us (Ephesians 2:11 to 22).

12. Hagar, Egyptian, female, slave, single mother, twice cast aside, is found and named and provided for by the God of Abraham. What does her story say to anyone who feels they are too far outside, too forgotten, or too unimportant for God to notice?

13. Jesus, in His earthly ministry, has a remarkable habit of seeing the people no one else sees. Look at the woman with the issue of blood (Mark 5:25 to 34), the Samaritan woman (John 4), the bent-over woman (Luke 13:10 to 17), the widow at Nain (Luke 7:11 to 17), and the children others tried to push away (Mark 10:13 to 16). How is Hagar's God the same as Jesus' God?

**Optional Application:** Is there a Hagar in your life, someone the world has overlooked, someone in your congregation, your neighborhood, your family who feels invisible? This week, name her by name. Send the text. Make the call. Sit with her. Be the eyes and hands of El Roi.

## Your response

14. a. In what specific area of your life do you most need to hear that God sees you?

b. What would change in how you walked through that area if you really believed it?

15. Write one sentence summarizing what you most want to take from Hagar's story, and one step you will take in light of it this week.

## For the group

**Warm-up.** Begin by asking each woman to recall a time she felt overlooked or invisible. Keep it short, one sentence each. Hagar's story will land more deeply when the group has named that kind of moment in their own lives.

**Discussion.** Hagar's story is especially powerful for women who feel they are outside the usual categories: single mothers, women with complicated pasts, women from other cultures, women

estranged from family. Be sensitive to who is in the room. Pay particular attention to questions 4 (God's questions to her), 6 (El Roi), 11 (the well she could not see), and 12 (Hagar and the gospel).

**Wrap-up.** Close by praying Psalm 139:1 to 6 over one another. Thank God that He is El Roi, the God who sees, and ask Him to make each woman deeply, restfully sure that she is not invisible to Him.