

“The God Who Sees,” Genesis 16:1-14, 21:8-21 (Twenty-first Sunday After Pentecost, October 14, 2018)

Now Sarai, Abram’s wife, had borne him no children. She had a female Egyptian servant whose name was Hagar. ² And Sarai said to Abram, “Behold now, the LORD has prevented me from bearing children. Go in to my servant; it may be that I shall obtain children by her.” And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai. ³ So, after Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abram’s wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her servant, and gave her to Abram her husband as a wife. ⁴ And he went in to Hagar, and she conceived. And when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress. ⁵ And Sarai said to Abram, “May the wrong done to me be on you! I gave my servant to your embrace, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt. May the LORD judge between you and me!” ⁶ But Abram said to Sarai, “Behold, your servant is in your power; do to her as you please.” Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she fled from her.

⁷ The angel of the LORD found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur. ⁸ And 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.” ⁹ The angel of the LORD said to her, “Return to your mistress and submit to her.” ¹⁰ The angel of the LORD also said to her, “I will surely multiply your offspring so that they cannot be numbered for multitude.” ¹¹ And the angel of the LORD said to her, “Behold, you are pregnant and shall bear a son. You shall call his name Ishmael, because the LORD has listened to your affliction. ¹² He shall be a wild donkey of a man, his hand against everyone and everyone’s hand against him, and he shall dwell over against all his kinsmen.”

¹³ So she called the name of the LORD who spoke to her, “You are a God of seeing,” for she said, “Truly here I have seen him who looks after me.” ¹⁴ Therefore the well was called Beer-lahai-roi; it lies between Kadesh and Bered.

⁸ And the child [this is Isaac, the son Abraham and Sarah eventually have together] grew and was weaned. And Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. ⁹ But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, laughing. ¹⁰ So she said to Abraham, “Cast out this slave woman with her son, for the son of this slave woman shall not be heir with my son Isaac.” ¹¹ And the thing was very displeasing to Abraham on account of his son. ¹² But God said to Abraham, “Be not displeased because of the boy and because of your slave woman. Whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for through Isaac shall your offspring be named. ¹³ And I will make a nation of the son of the slave woman also, because he is your offspring.” ¹⁴ So Abraham rose early in the morning and took bread and a skin of water and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed and wandered in the wilderness of Beersheba.

¹⁵ When the water in the skin was gone, she put the child under one of the bushes. ¹⁶ Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot, for she said, “Let me not look on the death of the child.” And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept. ¹⁷ And God heard the voice of the boy, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, “What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heard the voice of the

boy where he is. ¹⁸ Up! Lift up the boy, and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make him into a great nation.” ¹⁹ Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water. And she went and filled the skin with water and gave the boy a drink. ²⁰ And God was with the boy, and he grew up. He lived in the wilderness and became an expert with the bow. ²¹ He lived in the wilderness of Paran, and his mother took a wife for him from the land of Egypt.

PRAY

We are studying the book of Genesis on Sunday mornings this fall, specifically the life of Abraham. Abraham is one of the main characters of the Bible. Three different world religions all look to Abraham as a founding father: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. He is often called a “hero of the faith.” And he was absolutely a man of faith in God – we’ve seen that repeatedly on Sunday mornings this fall and we are just now to the halfway point in the series.

But don’t make the mistake of thinking that means Abraham was perfect. He wasn’t. He was a man of faith, but he was not without his flaws. Genesis 16 and Genesis 21 tells us about one his flaws with Sarah his wife and Hagar – Sarah’s servant who became, technically, Abraham’s second wife. Abraham then has a child with Hagar named Ishmael.

How do we understand this story? It is not giving us any pointers on how a couple should deal with infertility. But it does teach us a lot about God, how we can relate to him, and how he will provide for us. Three points: first, Abraham’s promise. Second, Sarah’s problem. Third, Hagar’s God.

First, Abraham’s promise. God first speaks to Abraham when Abraham is seventy-five years old, and God makes him a promise. We read it back in Genesis 12:2-3: “² And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³ I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

Even though Abraham is long past the age when a man can expect children, God promises to give Abraham a family. And not just any family – this family will eventually become a mighty nation. Through this nation all the people of the world will be blessed.

This is the promise that consumes the next several chapters of the Bible and, ultimately, it is the story of the whole Bible. Will God fulfill this promise to Abraham? How will God do it, since Abraham is so old and his wife, also, is beyond childbearing years? And even if God does give Abraham descendants, how will God use those descendants to bless the whole world?

The answer is that God does fulfill his promise. He will give Abraham a child named Isaac through his wife Sarah. Through Isaac God will build for himself a great nation named Israel after Isaac’s son. And out of that nation of Israel will come the savior of the world named Jesus Christ.

Abraham’s promise, as it turns out, is also our promise. We have all sinned and displeased the God who made us. But if we believe the promise of God’s love and grace in Jesus Christ – that

Jesus is very God of very God yet also fully man, that he came and lived on this earth the perfect, sinless life we should have lived, but didn't, and that on the cross he died the horrible death we deserve in our place, if we believe in his resurrection, his ascension, and his future return – then we will be reconciled to God and our sins won't be remembered. One day we'll be delivered even from death. Death becomes a doorway to life.

Do you believe that God has kept his promise to Abraham? Do you claim that promise for yourself? A lot of you I suspect would say, "Yes, absolutely I believe that promise. I'm a Christian, I've been a Christian for years. Of course, I believe that Jesus is the son of God." A lot of you would say that – but do you really *believe* that?

Second, Sarah's problem. Sarah knows God's promise to Abraham. By chapter 16 of Genesis she's known it for ten years. Yet this is how that chapter starts: "Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children." Genesis 16:1a. Sarah is barren. Sarah can't have any children.

Now, did she believe God's promise that God would give Abraham children? I suspect just like many of us she would have said, "Yes, absolutely I believe that promise." She believed the promise, but she didn't really *believe* it, did she? We know that because we know about Hagar. "[Sarah] had a female Egyptian servant whose name was Hagar. ² And Sarai said to Abram, 'Behold now, the LORD has prevented me from bearing children. Go in to my servant; it may be that I shall obtain children by her.' And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai." Genesis 16:1b-2.

Sarah said she believed God's promise, but at another more practical level she didn't really believe it at all, did she? She did not really believe **God** would give Abraham a son. Sarah really believed it was up to **her** to give Abraham a son. Sarah believed she had to compromise and take matters into her own hands. When push came to shove, she had to choose between believing God and the baby. And what did she choose? The baby. So Sarah gave Abraham Hagar, her Egyptian servant.

At first, it looked like it worked. Hagar conceived. She's going to have a baby. But what followed that? **Nothing but strife, sorrow, pain, and regret.**

It begins with Hagar looking "with contempt" on Sarah. You just know Hagar is thinking, "All these years I've been your slave, but now I am going to be the mother of your husband's child. Now I'm the wife that matters." Hagar becomes arrogant.

Sarah's heart, in turn, is broken. This was her idea, but it's blown up in her face and now when she sees Hagar she is not *relieved* that Abraham will have a child. She is *reminded* of her inability to conceive. For a woman in that culture, the inability to bear children was seen as the ultimate curse. Sarah is devastated, and so she lashes out in anger – but not initially at Hagar. At Abraham!

For a time, Abraham didn't really believe God either. He listened to his wife instead of trusting in the promise. Abraham did what Sarah said she wanted, and now she's mad at him for listening to her. You can just see Abraham throwing up his hands and saying, "I can't win with you!"

Hagar's contempt for Sarah quickly turns to despair. "6 But Abram said to Sarai, 'Behold, your servant is in your power; do to her as you please.' Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she fled from her." Genesis 16:6. "Dealt harshly" doesn't do the Hebrew justice – Sarah began to beat Hagar. Hagar runs from her home, her spirit broken.

Hagar later returns to Abraham and Sarah, but we read in chapter 21 that the destruction spreads from the first generation to the second generation. The setting is the party that Abraham and Sarah throw for the son they do eventually have, Isaac. It's the day Isaac was weaned, and he would have been about three years old. Ishmael would have been about seventeen years old. "But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, laughing." Genesis 21:9. Like with Sarah "dealing harshly" with Hagar in chapter 16, this translation of the Hebrew into "laughing" doesn't do justice to the context. Ishmael didn't just laugh – Paul says in Galatians 4 that Ishmael "persecuted" Isaac. Ishmael threatened Isaac with harm.

That's not right, but we can extend some sympathy to Ishmael. Things have changed dramatically around the house since Isaac's birth. Ishmael has been replaced. Isaac is the child of the promise, not Ishmael, so you know he feels rejected.

But then imagine you're Sarah, and you see your seventeen year old stepson (he's practically a man) threatening physical harm on your three year old boy? What would you do?

And this enmity between the children of Isaac and Ishmael continues to this day. Arab Muslims claim descent from Ishmael. Jews claim descent from Isaac. Almost every week for the past seventy-plus years you could read a story in whatever news source you subscribe to about some conflict in the Middle East, and all the participants in that conflict would agree the roots of that conflict are found in this story in Genesis 16 and 21.

Here's what I want you to see: every time you take matters into your own hands and take a shortcut (like Sarah did) and compromise your integrity or slide into outright disobedience to provide for yourself instead of waiting on God to fulfill his promises what follows will always be **strife, pain, sorrow, and regret**. There will be fallout from failing to trust God's promises.

You say, "What promises?" Like we've already said, the big promise of the Bible is Jesus Christ. Now you say, "I believe in Jesus Christ, I believe in his promises" but do you really believe? Here's how you can know you believe: when you resist the temptation to pull a Sarah and instead rely each day on all the smaller promises of God that flow from that big promise of Jesus Christ.

Promises like these: Isaiah 41:10: "[F]ear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand."

Philippians 4:19: "And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus."

Hebrews 13:5-6: "Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have,

for he has said, 'I will never leave you nor forsake you.' ⁶ So we can confidently say, 'The Lord is my helper; I will not fear; what can man do to me?'"

2 Corinthians 9:8: "And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work."

Too often people they say they believe in Jesus and they claim these promises but then a problem comes along and they pull a Sarah, and it becomes apparent they don't really believe at all.

I've seen so many young people, men and women, who say they believe in the promise that God will take care of them in Jesus Christ. But they face a problem: they desperately want relational fulfillment – they want the pleasures of marriage, they want the pleasures of sex – but there's no one interested in them. So they pull a Sarah: they take matters into their own hands and compromise their integrity. They can't wait on God to bless them. They date someone they know they shouldn't. They cross lines they know they shouldn't. They get married to someone who does not have the same values they do. And, in the end, there is **strife, sorrow, pain, and regret**. They said they believed in the promise, but when push comes to shove they don't really believe God will provide – they really believe that only someone of the opposite sex can provide.

I've seen parents who say they know their kids will only be happy in the Lord. But then they pull a Sarah: they take matters into their own hands and compromise their integrity. They can't wait on God to do a work in their kids' lives, so these parents relate to their children out of fear and guilt instead of faith and hope. They push their kids to do stuff that, from an eternal perspective, does not matter and they let things of eternal import like the church, like prayer, like repentance, like Scripture slide. So long as the grades are good and the touchdowns and homeruns and date parties keep coming, they just won't confront their kids over their obvious character flaws. They don't want to start a fight. But then adulthood comes, and the character flaws can't be so easily masked anymore, and there is only **strife, sorrow, pain, and regret**. They said they believed in the promise, but when push comes to shove they didn't really believe God would provide – they really believe that worldly success for their children can provide.

In Galatians 4, Paul interprets the story of Sarah and Hagar for us. A lot of people have read this passage and said, "Wow – Paul sure is harsh when it comes to Hagar." That's not what Paul's doing here. He says up in verse 24 that he's using the story of Sarah and Hagar as an allegory. Paul would have been just as sympathetic to the historical Hagar and her plight as we would be.

Yet Paul writes, "²⁸ Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise. ²⁹ But just as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so also it is now. ³⁰ But what does the Scripture say? 'Cast out the slave woman and her son, for the son of the slave woman shall not inherit with the son of the free woman.' ³¹ So, brothers, we are not children of the slave but of the free woman." Galatians 4:28-31.

When Paul says, "We are not children of the slave but of the free woman" he's saying, "If you believe in Jesus you are children of the promise and God will provide for you. But if you insist on pulling a Sarah and taking matters into your own hands, you will become a slave to whatever you put your hope in to bless you." If you trust a relationship to provide, you'll be a slave to that

relationship. You won't be able to get out of it even when you know you need to get out of it. If you trust your career to provide, you'll be a slave to your career. You'll work yourself to death and ruin your health and alienate your family.

Paul is simply saying, "The only way you can be free is if you rely completely on him. Don't compromise or take matters into your hands or else you'll wind up a slave."

But when the problems come it's hard to believe in the promise. The problems look so big and the promises seem so far away. So how can you do it?

Third, Hagar's God. Hagar, we read in Genesis 16:6, ran away. Sarah beats her, so she fled. She's trying to go back to Egypt, her homeland. But on the way she meets the Lord. He says, "Go back to Abraham and Sarah. It will be ok. It's hard now but I promise I will take care of you, too. Even though your son is not the child of the promise he, too, will become a great nation. Go back, Hagar – it will be ok."

"So she called the name of the LORD who spoke to her, 'You are a God of seeing,' for she said, 'Truly here I have seen him who looks after me.'" Genesis 16:13.

Like Sarah, Hagar encountered a problem. But she didn't take matters into her own hands. Why didn't she say, "No – I'm going home to Egypt and I'll take my chances there"? **Because she knew that God saw her. She knew that God saw her, that God looked upon her with favor, and so she trusted him and obeyed him.**

Someone might say, "Yeah, but God appeared to Hagar. Hagar saw God and she obeyed. If I saw God like that I could trust him, too." No, that's totally misunderstanding the story. Look at verse 14: "Therefore the well [where God appeared to Hagar] was called Beer-lahai-roi ..." That means "the well of the Living One *who sees me*." She did not name it "the well where I saw the Living One." What was paramount for Hagar was not that she saw God but that God saw her!

Friends, we are made to see God, to behold his face. One day every eye will see him. But what really matters is not that we see God. What matters is *how God sees us!* Just seeing God will not necessarily bring comfort. Most of the time in the Bible when God shows up people think they are going to die. The book of Revelation says on the judgment day there will be those who call on the mountains to fall on them rather than have to look on God.

What's paramount is knowing how God sees you and that when God sees you he's pleased. When my kids were little, whenever they were playing the yard or on the trampoline or in the pool and they did something they thought was cool, you know what they said? They said, "Dad, look at me! Watch this!" Why? They wanted to know I was pleased with them. We are all like that.

Friends, in Jesus Christ God looks on you like that. In Jesus Christ God loves what he sees when he sees you, because Jesus lived the perfect life you should have lived, but didn't. And on the cross he died for your sins in your place. In Jesus all God sees when he sees you is someone he loves. That's why 2 Corinthians 1:20 says, "For all the promises of God find their Yes in him."

That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory.” When you know that, you can trust his promises. You don’t have take matters in your own hands or compromise your integrity – you can trust him and wait on him to provide.

A few quick applications: *first*, this is why small groups are so important. You will go through times where you doubt God sees you, or you doubt that God likes what he sees when he looks at you. When those times come you need other Christians in your life who can remind you that God sees you, that he is faithful to his promises, and he will see you through. Then you can be like Job: “Behold, I go forward, but he is not there, and backward, but I do not perceive him; ⁹ on the left hand when he is working, I do not behold him; he turns to the right hand, but I do not see him. ¹⁰ But he knows the way that I take [he sees me!]; when he has tried me, I shall come out as gold.” Job 23:8-10.

Second, look at who it is God sees when he sees Hagar. Hagar is an Egyptian, not a Hebrew. Hagar is a slave, not free. She is a woman, not a man. She and Ishmael are not in the chosen line. Yet God sees them and is concerned about them.

A lot of the folks in this room grew up in church and feel like Christianity is your heritage. Everyone in your family has always believed and gone to church. But some of you didn’t grow up that way and you wonder, “Can I ever really be accepted by the God of the Bible? Can I ever really be a part of the Christian church?” The message of Hagar is absolutely yes. All you have to do is believe the promises God makes to all nations through Abraham.

You say, “It can’t be that easy. It can’t be that simple.” Oh, but it is. God sees you, he sees you and in Jesus Christ he loves you and approves of you.

Finally, say you are that person who pulled a Sarah and compromised your integrity. You married someone you shouldn’t have. You raised your kids for worldly success and not the Lord. Are you just ruined? Of course not. Hagar wasn’t ruined – God provided. Ishmael wasn’t ruined – God made him into a great nation. And even Sarah got Isaac, the desire of her heart. God blessed them. He can make great things out of anything. Indeed, he can make great things out of nothing. Look to him in heaven and trust him as he sees you.

2 Chronicles 16:9a: “For the eyes of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to give strong support to those whose heart is blameless toward him.” Our God is a God who sees, and in Jesus Christ he promises to provide for you. AMEN.