



Motherhood and the God Who Sees

Mother's Day

Mother's Day is hard for many women. I know many women who live with an ache for marriage and children. Several battle infertility or have lost new lives to miscarriage or stillbirth. There are those who are estranged from their own mother, hardly even speaking to them. Some moms struggle with how their own issues challenge their parenting. And there are those like Rebecca and Carina, for whom Mother's Day can be a reminder of joy but also of deep loss. Holidays are often hard for those who grieve. And the idealistic hype of Mother's Day can salt the wound of childlessness, grief, or estrangement.

For this reason, some Christians are cynical about Mother's Day. They call it a "Hallmark Holiday" that pop American culture has used to overshadow the far more important celebration of Easter. I'm all for getting rid of the Hallmark part of the holiday, but I'm not so eager to abandon Mother's day altogether. I mean, the brunch itself is worth it! But beyond that, the Bible has a lot to say about motherhood and the importance of honoring mothers. But unlike the unrealistic and sentimental images dished out by Hallmark, the Bible offers stories of real women's lives. For us who find Mother's Day difficult, the Bible offers stories of hope for women who live in the real world.

One such story is found in the book of Genesis. Genesis 16 lands us smack dab in the middle of Abram's life. So you might think the woman I'm referring to is his wife, Sarai. In the larger narrative story of Genesis, Sarai is certainly the main woman. But Genesis 16 focuses in on another woman, not nearly as well known and celebrated. Her name is Hagar. Hagar is almost an invisible character among giants like Adam and Eve, Abram and Sarai, Isaac and Rebecca. No wonder—she was just a slave girl; the maidservant of Sarai. Slaves had practically no status in that day and age. Not only that, she wasn't Jewish but she was an Egyptian. Years earlier, when Abram sojourned in Egypt, Hagar was a given as gift to Abram by Pharaoh (Gen 12:16). Like many mothers, Hagar experienced ridicule, loneliness and abandonment. In many ways, she felt invisible. But her story can be an encouragement to us because it shows us that God meets us wherever we're at; he hears our cry for help and he sees us. You're no less important to him than Hagar was.

I. Undeserved Trouble 16:1-6

The story begins in Genesis 16:1 where Hagar is introduced right alongside Sarai. **"Now Sarai, Abram's wife had borne him no children, and she had an Egyptian maid whose name was Hagar."** Years earlier, God had promised Abram that his descendants would become a great nation who would bless the whole world. He and Sarai had waited and waited for a child, but as they grew older they began to wonder. Then God appeared to Abram again and promised that his descendants would be more numerous than the stars in the sky, and Abram believed. This had just happened in Genesis 15. But here in Genesis 16 the man of faith becomes the man of no faith. Instead of walking by faith, he walks by sight and it gets him into a lot of trouble.

It started with a suggestion by his wife, Sarai. Look at vv. 2–4. **"So Sarai said to Abram, 'Now behold, the LORD has prevented me from bearing children. Please go in to my maid; perhaps I will obtain children through her.' And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai. After Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Abram's wife Sarai took Hagar the Egyptian, her maid, and gave her to her husband Abram as his wife. He went in to Hagar, and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress was despised in her sight."** The shame of not having children probably hit Sarai harder than it had Abram. Abram's frustration was her disgrace. So instead of trusting and waiting for God to fulfill his promise, she takes matters into her own hands and suggests that her husband see if he could have a child by her Egyptian maid, Hagar. It sounds scandalous to us, but she was operating within the bounds of the laws and customs of her times. Maybe this would be God's way of fulfilling the promise. Abram must have given it some serious thought, but in the end he did what most men do—he did what she told him to do! In this case, he was a lot like Adam, who had followed the lead of his wife, Eve. It's not always wrong to listen to your wife, but in this case he stumbled badly. Even though Hagar conceived, this wasn't God's way of solving the problem. He should have waited. His wife might have been hard to live with as a result, but down the road he would have saved himself and his wife from a lot of pain.

Until now, Hagar has done nothing wrong. She was caught in a situation that wasn't her doing. She hadn't sought it, and when the decision was made she

didn't have the right to refuse. But Hagar wasn't perfect. The text says she "despised" Sarai. It's a strong word. It likely describes a very human and selfish response to the situation. Perhaps she found subtle ways to remind Sarai of her maternity. One thing that's important to notice. At the end of v.3 it says that Hagar actually became Abram's wife; that means she was no longer a maidservant. This didn't always happen in these situations, but it was done here to ensure that the child which came from the union would be a legal heir. So it appears she used her new found status to compete with Sarai. It wasn't right to act that way, but she hadn't asked to be put in this situation. Sarai had created her own rival.

One thing that happens when we stop trusting God is that we start blaming others. We see this in Sarai. First, she blamed God. In v.2 when she approached Abram she said, "the Lord has prevented me from bearing children." That might have been true, but behind those words was a belligerent spirit. In essence, she's saying, "God has put us in this impossible situation. He's forcing us to do what we would rather not do. We have no choice but to act."

But not only did she blame God, she also blamed her husband. Look at vv. 5–6. **"And Sarai said to Abram, 'May the wrong done me be upon you I gave my maid into your arms, but when she saw that she had conceived, I was despised in her sight May the LORD judge between you and me.' But Abram said to Sarai, 'Behold, your maid is in your power; do to her what is good in your sight.' So Sarai treated her harshly, and she fled from her presence."** How real is this! We stop trusting God. We act out in the flesh. Things go sour. We find someone to blame. The fact is, they were both at fault. Neither trusted God. Husband and wife were complicit in their sin. And, once again, Abram lets his wife call the shots. He can't handle her anger, so he just says, "Do what you want with her. She's your problem. Just deal with it." (Such a guy thing to say!). So Sarai treated her harshly. We can only imagine what cruelties took place in that home. Notice how in v.5 Sarai now calls Hagar a maid instead of a wife. In v.6 Abram calls her the same thing. Hagar's been demoted! Finally, Hagar decided she had enough and ran away. Just like the Hebrews would later flee from the harsh treatment of the Egyptians, Hagar flees into the wilderness, pregnant and alone. No one from Abram's home goes after her. Sarai and Abram seem content to brush the whole affair aside and sweep it under the rug.

II. Unsought Blessing

A. The Lord seeks us: They don't go after her, but someone else does. Someone else sees her. Look at v. 7. **"Now the angel of the LORD found her**

by a spring of water in the wilderness, by the spring on the way to Shur." This is the first mention of "the angel of the Lord" in the Bible. It might look like this is just another heavenly messenger, on par with angels like Gabriel and Michael. But careful study reveals that the angel of the Lord is none other than the pre incarnate Christ. This is Jesus before he became a man. That's why later in v.13 Hagar will declare that she has seen God and lived. So, just as Adam and Eve heard the Lord walking in the cool of the garden, seeking them out after they had fallen and were hiding, so now he also seeks out Hagar. Aren't you glad that the Lord seeks us? At this point, it doesn't appear that Hagar was seeking him. She was running away. She was headed back to Egypt. We know that because she was resting by a spring that is on the road south to Egypt. But God sought her.

We might wonder, why would he chase down Hagar of all people? Why would he bother with this Egyptian, fugitive, slave girl? It appears that God cares about such people. He cares about the people who feel invisible in our society and he seeks them. I can think of countless reasons why a woman and a mother might want to run away from her situation. It might be the neglect of a husband. It might be the endless uphill climb of raising a child with a disability, or the shame of having a child who gets into serious trouble. It might just be the feeling that you're on a nonstop merry-go-round of activity, none of which has any lasting value. Some may choose not to run away physically, but find ways to "check out" emotionally. The good news is that, either way, God cares enough to seek us out in the wilderness of our own making.

B. The Lord questions us: And when he finds us, he addresses us in a very personal way. Look at v. 8a. **"He said, 'Hagar, Sarai's maid, where have you come from and where are you going?'"** It's very unusual in the OT for God to address a woman by name. It must have startled Hagar that he knew her. She is "Hagar, Sarai's maid." Then he asks her two questions. I'm always intrigued by how God asks questions. I mean, he knows the answer. He isn't looking for information. But these questions force us to look at ourselves and to think through what we're doing. I remember as a boy being at my father's work. He had a little dressing area with a closet and I opened the closet and taped to the mirror on the back of the closet door was a piece of paper that just said, "Where are you going?" It's good to ask ourselves that once in a while, isn't it?

And look how she responds. **"And she said, 'I am fleeing from the presence of my mistress Sarai'"** (v. 8b). She answered the first question but not the second. Maybe she didn't want to face the facts. What kind of life would she have back in Egypt? She had left there a slave; she would surely return as one. But now she would have no owner; no protection; no one to provide for her child. Where WAS she going?

C. The Lord commands us: And then he issues her a no nonsense command. **“Then the angel of the LORD said to her, ‘Return to your mistress, and submit yourself to her authority’”** (v. 9). Those couldn’t have been easy words to hear. She may have thought twice about heading back to Egypt, but the one place she didn’t want to be was in that woman’s house. The one thing she didn’t want to do was submit to her! So often this is the hard call of God upon a mother’s life. “Return to that marriage that doesn’t meet your needs.” “Return to those thankless children that take you for granted.” Certainly, there are abusive situations where it’s right to run. But, often times, God doesn’t deliver us from our tough circumstances, but he meets us in the middle of them. And there are things about him you can’t experience anywhere else but there, in the very place you want so badly escape from. So go back and submit to those people and those circumstances that God has placed you under. Sometimes we think, “Well, I’ve made a wrong turn in my life, but there is no way I can go back.” But sometimes you can go back. You can go back to the same situation as a different person with a different perspective.

D. The Lord promises us: In the midst of that, there is a promise of blessing. That’s what happened with Hagar. Look at vv. 10–12. **“Moreover, the angel of the LORD said to her, ‘I will greatly multiply your descendants so that they will be too many to count.’ The angel of the LORD said to her further, ‘Behold, you are with child, And you will bear a son; And you shall call his name Ishmael, Because the LORD has given heed to your affliction. He will be a wild donkey of a man, His hand will be against everyone, And everyone’s hand will be against him; And he will live to the east of all his brothers.’”** There are several things to note. She’s promised descendants too numerous to count. Then the angel speaks specifically about the child in her womb. He says she’ll have a son and name him Ishmael. And he’ll be “a wild donkey of a man.” He’ll be a fighter. He’ll be untamed. Isn’t that great! If Hagar were a guy she would be thinking, “This is awesome! I’ve always wanted a wild donkey of a man! No one will mess with my son!?” Even as a woman, after being mistreated in Abram’s home, Hagar must have taken some comfort in the fact that her son would be able to stand up for himself. And, later, as she was raising this wild donkey, it comforted her to know that God made him what he was. I was talking to a mom in our church this week who said that God used this very verse to comfort her, because her son is a like wild donkey, too. And she learned that it’s not her job to change that. All she can do is sort of work with that and try to channel that towards a redemptive purpose.

Perhaps the most important thing about this promise is that it was a turning point in her own relationship with the Lord. Ishmael means “God hears.” Every time she or someone else called his name she would remember that God had heard her cries in the wilderness.

III. Unsurpassed Insight

But that’s not all she learned. When she reflected on this encounter, she took it one step further. She realized that the God who hears her is also the God who sees her. Look at vv. 13–14. **“Then she called the name of the LORD who spoke to her, ‘You are a God who sees’; for she said, ‘Have I even remained alive here after seeing Him?’ Therefore the well was called Beer-lahai-roi; behold, it is between Kadesh and Bered.”** Hagar gives the Lord a new name that reflects what she learned about him. His name is Elroi, which means “the God who sees.” She is amazed that she has survived seeing the One who sees her. She names the well, “the well of the living One who sees me.” And when the writer of Genesis wrote this he said, “That well is still there. It’s between Kadesh and Bered.”

Today we hear this and we think, “Such a basic truth. God sees me. God sees everybody.” You didn’t have to go to Sunday School to learn that. Everybody knows that. It’s the most basic thing about God. Theologians have a fancy term for this—the “omniscience” of God. The idea is that God sees all things because he knows all things. That might be good for a seminary class, but why is that good for me? Why is that good for a woman who hasn’t been able to have the children she always dreamed of? How does that help a mom in the trenches of wiping runny noses and changing diapers? How does that help a single mom who feels abandoned and overwhelmed? How does that help a young girl who has lost her mother?

I think the key is the way that Hagar personalized this. He isn’t just the God who sees, he’s the God who sees ME. That’s why she named the well, “The well of the loving One who sees ME.” He doesn’t just see generally; he sees specifically. He sees you. He sees you as much as if there were nobody else in the world for him to look at. I’m looking at a lot of people right now, and so my attention must be divided; but the infinite mind of God is able to grasp a million objects at once, and yet focus on one, as if there were nothing else but that one. You, today, are looked at by God as much as if throughout space there were not another creature but yourself. Can you conceive that? Suppose that every living creature in heaven and earth died, and you’re left alone, the last person, and there is God looking at you. Imagine that there was only you to be looked at! That’s how it is. God really looks at you as if you were the only one his hands ever made. It’s like when I get my son’s team pictures. Who do I look for first? Who’s the only one I really care about seeing?

He sees you entirely. He doesn’t just see where you are and what you’re doing. He sees within. He saw within Hagar a bitterness of spirit towards her mistress. He saw her rebellious heart. And yet, he still sought her out. He still pursued her. You may be harboring some

bitterness or resentment. You may be nursing some secret desire or fantasy that no one knows about. You may feel estranged from God as a result. But God sees what's in your heart and he still pursues you.

He sees you constantly. There are times when we like to be alone. We go to a place where no one can see us or hear us. But God sees us. We find ourselves at a place in life where we know we shouldn't be. We're out in the wilderness by the spring on the way to Shur. We're heading back towards our old life. God sees. He doesn't just see you when you're in his will, but He sees you when you're out of it.

Maybe the best thing of all is that he sees you supremely. Years ago I told you an embarrassing story about how I left the house one morning for work and stopped to get a cup of coffee. I was standing in line and I noticed a number of people were staring at me. I happened to be wearing a new leather jacket and I thought, "Well, I must be looking particularly good this morning." It seemed to me that I was especially being checked out by members of the opposite sex. I got my coffee and when I got in my car I discovered I had left something at home. I drove home and when I walked in the house Lynn just looked at me sort of dumbfounded. She said, "Don't tell me you went to Peet's like that!" It turns out I had cut myself shaving that morning and stuck a number of little pieces of Kleenex on my face to blotch the blood. I had forgotten to remove them before I went out in public! I couldn't see them, but everyone else could.

Did you know that God sees us better than we can even see ourselves? And because of that he sees what we need better than we ourselves do. That's why we have to lay down our own wisdom and return to the path he has given us to walk on. We know Hagar did this from vv.15–16. **"So Hagar bore Abram a son; and Abram called the name of his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to him."** I believe Hagar went back a changed woman. Why? In that culture it was a man's right to name his child. But Abram used the name she brought back for the child. Her testimony after she returned convinced Abram that the God who had seen him had also seen her.

The wonderful thing about God is that when he hears and when he sees, he always responds. Years later, when the Hebrew people groaned under Egyptian slavery, Scripture says, **"God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God saw the sons of Israel, and God took notice of them"** (Ex.3:24-25). This is what Hagar learned. Ishmael—God hears. Beerlahoi-roi—God sees. And when God hears and sees, he also acts. As he did with Hagar, he seeks you, he addresses you, he commands you and he promises you.

CONCLUSION

So on this Mother's Day, whether you're suffering or celebrating, remember the God who sees. Don't compare yourself with greeting card moms. Think of real women like Eve, Sarai, Rachel, Leah, Hannah and Mary. They all teach us that He sees you if you're a mother who has lost your child. He sees you if you're one of those women who long to be a wife and a mother, but aren't. He sees you if you feel alone and neglected in your own home. He sees you if the task is overwhelming. Today on Mother's Day, we honor mothers, as we should, but we worship the God who sees.

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