

Introduction:

A. Turn to Gen. 16. This whole story is a mess.

Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children.

But God had promised Abram a son. "A son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir. ... Look up at the sky and count the stars... So shall your offspring be." But Abram was 85 and.... no son. I don't know if anything was ever said, but the burden of barrenness rested rock-heavy on Sarai, who "had borne him no children."

But she had an Egyptian slave named Hagar;

Abram & Sarai had been in Egypt, where Abram had passed Sarai off to Pharaoh as his sister. Apparently there Sarai had gotten a slave girl, Hagar.

²so she said to Abram, "The Lord has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my slave; perhaps I can build a family through her."

Both slavery and surrogacy were acceptable in those days but you don't have to be Dr. Phil to know that was asking for trouble. Maybe Sarai wouldn't have done it if hadn't been for God's promise. After all, she was 75. I suppose she figured that "God helps those who help themselves."

Abram agreed to what Sarai said. ³ So after Abram had been living in Canaan ten years, Sarai his wife took her Egyptian slave Hagar and gave her to her husband to be his wife.⁴ He slept with Hagar, and she conceived.

Awwwkward! I don't care what culture you're in! All those years with Sarai without a child and then, *what?*, one night with Hagar? The glances. Blushing. Counting. Pregnant. Oh, so messy!

When she [Hagar] knew she was pregnant, she began to despise her mistress.

Despise—regard lightly. Now the slave is one-up on her mistress. Maybe Hagar made sure Sarai saw her knitting booties, or maybe it was just a superior look in her eyes. But Hagar knew what she was doing and it stung Sarai.

⁵Then Sarai said to Abram, "You are responsible for the wrong I am suffering. I put my slave in your arms, and now that she knows she is pregnant, she despises me. May the LORD judge between you and me."

Chuck Swindoll wrote, "So now Sarai appeals to the LORD!" She should have done that back up in verse 1. And now Sarai is on the outs with both Hagar and Abram. Meals must have all been served on ice! Sarai blames Abram because Hagar despises her! Sarai wanted Abram to put Hagar back in her place as a slave. But Hagar was now his wife also. Talk about a no-win situation. So messy!

"Your slave is in your hands," Abram said. "Do with her whatever you think best." Then Sarai mistreated Hagar; so she fled from her.

"Your slave"? What happened to "wife." So Sarai mistreats the mother of Abram's only child. The Heb. word suggests *humiliating emotional mistreatment*. It gets so bad Hagar runs away. Pregnant and alone. Into the desert. On a seldom used and dangerous road, a kind of wilderness back alley, heading back toward Egypt to the people who'd sold her off in the first place. Abram is left, torn between two lovers. Sarai is bitter and baby-less, her plan had all gone to pieces. **What a mess!**

- B. None of these three people are all that admirable. Abram comes off as dull and passive, seemingly oblivious to the promise of God, Sarai as a schemer caught in her own faithless and desperate plan, and the hapless Hagar as taking the first chance she gets to lord it over Sarai. But as this chapter moves forward, our attention is drawn primarily to Hagar. She wasn't perfect, and we don't even know that she personally believed in the God of Abram, but she is the victim here and she is the one with a story to tell.

Cody F. Miller is a favorite artist of mine. I came across a painting he did called, "Hagar," based on these verses in Gen. 16. In his notes on the painting he likens Hagar's experience to the Ralph Ellison's description of his experience as an African American's in his book, *Invisible Man*. "I am an invisible man. . . . I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids—and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me." That was Hagar's situation. I suppose as a slave Hagar often felt like no one really *saw* her, that she was invisible. But it was all the worse after she'd slept in Abram's arms and then carried his baby, only to be rejected and driven out into the wilderness.

I. PERHAPS YOU ALSO KNOW WHAT IT'S LIKE TO FEEL INVISIBLE AND UNHEARD

- A. Was it the home you grew up in? Do you go through a divorce? Maybe it's how you feel at school—invisible and unheard. Were you abused or attacked? Did someone take what was most precious to you? Perhaps death left you alone. Does it feel like no one really sees you, no one really knows you, no one ever really hears you?
- B. There's a kind of pain—a kind of rejection—that seems to sort of dissolve a person, till we are more than lonely; till we are no longer really there. It's like we are driven off into a vast, empty wilderness, as if we're on a desert road to nowhere. So it was for Hagar. And it would get worse before it got better.

Vv.7-16.... In any Bible story the focus is on what God says or does. The rest of the story is just the frame for the picture.

II. GOD HEARS AND SEES YOU WHEN NO ONE ELSE DOES (16:7-16)

- A. Let's start with the first line of v.7, "The angel of the LORD found Hagar..." The Heb. word translated *angel* means *messenger*—one sent by God. This may have been the Son of God himself. The striking thing here is that Hagar wasn't looking for God. We're not told that she prayed, or for that matter, if she had ever stood at one of Abram's altars to the LORD. But no one ever turns to God whom God hasn't sought first.
- B. Here's another thing: God knows you and your future far better than you know yourself. The angel of the LORD told Hagar about all the descendants she would have—a promise similar to the one God made to Abram. He knew the baby in her womb was a son—without seeing a sonogram. He knew what that boy's name needed to be and why. And he knew what that boy would be like. In other words, God not only found Hagar by that spring, he knew her and her future in detail. And so he knows you. He knit each of us together in our mother's womb. He knows the days allotted to us, how many hairs on our head. In that same **Ps 139** David sang, "*How amazing are your thoughts concerning me, God!*"
- C. The center of this word from the Lord is this, "You shall name him Ishmael for the Lord has heard of your misery." Ishmael means God hears. Actually, the text literally says, "the Lord

has heard your misery.” God didn’t just hear of her misery, as if by messenger or prayer. God hears our affliction, our misery, as though it has a voice of its own; the soundless ache of our messed up lives, of relationships gone awry, of heartbreak, of despising and being despised, of babies whose futures will be difficult. God hears!

This truth is made all the more certain because of Jesus. “When Jesus saw the crowds he had compassion on them because they were like sheep without a shepherd.” Jesus said, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.” [Matt 11:28] Peter tells us, “*Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.*” [1 Pet 5:7] You may not know any more about God than Hagar did. But know this: **God hears your misery.**

- D. **In Gen 16:13 Hagar gave God a second name, a name with two meanings,** “*She gave this name to the LORD who spoke to her: ‘You are the God who sees me,’ for she said, ‘I have now seen the One who sees me.’*” This is what God says to all who identify with Hagar’s misery, feeling lonely or invisible or homeless. It seems incredible that God—high and lifted up, the King of the universe, saw and *came* to Hagar. And even more incredible that he sees and comes to us. No... comes to *live in* us!

One Sunday after church a young woman in our church asked if I could visit with her friend, whom she’d brought with her that morning. When we sat down, I could see from her eyes even before I got hints of her story, that this young lady felt worthless and empty. Eventually I told her about Psalm 103, the one that begins, “*Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forgot not all his benefits.*” Then I told her about each of the five benefits: “*He forgives all your sins. He heals all your soul’s diseases. He redeems your life from the pit. He crowns you with love and compassion. He satisfies your desires with good things.*” On that fourth one, “*He crowns you with love and compassion,*” I leaned forward and spoke her name, and said something like, “*You are like a princess to Jesus and he has a crown—a lovely tiara—to put on your head.*” My hands formed a circle, and I reached across and put that unseen crown on your head. “*He crowns you with love—he loves you, personally. He delights in you. And he crowns you with compassion. His heart goes out to you. He knows what you’ve been through. He can heal what you’ve suffered.*”

That was God’s message to Hagar—who’s name meant ‘Flight’, as in one who flies away—there by that spring.

Well, if this was a typical story book, we’d turn to the last page and read how everyone lived happily ever after. But this was real life and it wasn’t like that. Once Ishmael was born the tension with Sarai only tightened. And despite his divine name, Ishmael was the kind of kid that breaks a mother’s heart. A “wild donkey” was seen as “fierce and independent with stubborn pride and an untamable spirit” [J Baldwin]. I think we’d liken him to a wild mustang. But the rough part is all the hostility that would characterize him. There’s no way to put a good shine on that. Think of being his mother! Think of being his mother when he was a 2-year old!! Wouldn’t it have been better if God had just let her go on her way back to Egypt? Back to her people and their gods? No, it wouldn’t have been. Here’s an important truth that all of us learn sooner or later:

III. GOD’S BLESSING HIDES IN SOME DARK CORNERS

- A. Why do you think God required Hagar to return to Sarai? Why did she have to go back into the mess? I think it was because the blessing of God rested on the household of Abram, as

messy as it was. Later, in **Gen 17**, “*Abraham said to God, ‘If only Ishmael might live under your blessing!’*” Abraham loved that boy! And while God’s covenant would be made with Isaac, God said, “*And as for Ishmael, I have heard you: I will surely bless him...*”

In order to be blessed by God we must be sheltered by the household of God. For us, that means first of all that we must be hidden in Christ, a much safer refuge than Abram’s household ever was. But I think it also means we must be part of the household of faith. We need to be part of a church because God dwells among his people and his blessings in Christ come through the church, the body of Christ. But churches, like Abram’s household, can certainly get messy!

I remember talking to a young man who knew Jesus but had not been in church for a long time because he, he told me, “most [people] don’t seem honest, they put on a happy face and act like everything is amazing, and that’s creepy, like Pleasantville creepy.” Wow! I told him I didn’t think that was really fair, certainly not of the people I served, but the church is where God meets people, it is his household, messy or not. It’s where he hears us and sees us, and where we see him.

That same week a woman in the church wrote me to say, “I have been reminded this past week of why God has us at our church. The congregants have come around us so beautifully. And last week I was part of the prayer team up front, along two guys who came up to me and prayed such rich prayers. The fellowship and prayers of God's people mean so much. May I not forget that.”

- B. I think the remarkable thing about Hagar is that she went back. She obeyed God. There she bore her son and Abram called him his own and named him Ishmael—*God hears*. Later, she was driven out of Abraham’s household again, and God met her once again by a well and rescued her and Ishmael, promising again that he would be the father of a great nation. He has. He is the father of all the Arab peoples.

Then Hagar disappeared from the Bible but I’m confident of this: all the rest of her days, whenever she called her son, Ishmael, she heard herself saying, *God hears*; even in times of wordless misery. And when she prayed to the seemingly silent heavens, she knew she had seen the LORD and that the LORD saw her. He *always* saw her.

And he will always hear you. He will always see you and you can always see him in Jesus.