

Did you hear the one about the optician who fell into the lens grinder? He made a spectacle of himself. The Bible ordinarily talks about our vision of God and the direction in which that vision leads us by faith. But today’s Scripture sort of turns the tables and indicates what, or who, God sees.

In Genesis 15 the LORD renews his covenant promise of land for Abram and his family. Abram would never have clear title to the land, and it would be more than 400 years before his descendants would journey there from Egypt. All that Abram received as far as a personal promise was that he would live a long life and be buried. He would live ninety more years and would have clear title to at least one thing—a cemetery plot.

In reality God’s promise to Abram was far greater than any old piece of real estate. So chapter 16 goes back to the promise of *“a son who is your own flesh and blood”* (15:4) God’s original promise to Abram was a great nation and a great name. Nations begin with a people; peoples begin with a community; and communities begin with a family. Yet after ten years in the land of Canaan, Abram and Sarai had no children. This is an awfully long time to wait, and I’m sure we would have been impatient with God, if not more so than Abram. Remember that Abram and Sarai had suffered through not having a child long before they entered Canaan. A couple today would seek the services of a fertility specialist. Many expensive options such as hormone shots and in-vitro fertilization are used these days. If these methods fail, things like donor eggs and sperm donors and surrogate mothers are resorted to. None of these options were available to Sarai and Abram. What Sarai suggested to her husband was the only way she knew they could have a family.

Sarai had a menial servant, an Egyptian by the name of Hagar. As her mistress, Hagar had to subject herself to the will of Sarai her master. Sarai felt that surely the LORD had another arrangement for them to have a child. By this time, Sarai had probably had gone through menopause. But Hagar was young, and older men can still father children. She could order Hagar into Abraham’s bed with the intention of conceiving a child that would belong to Sarai because Hagar belonged to her. So this was a kind of surrogate motherhood. The surrogate method causes plenty of heartache when employed today, so we should not expect the results to be any less painful back then.

She talks Abram into the plan and the deed is done. The eighty five year old Abram gets Hagar pregnant. So far, it looks like Sarai was right. Abram would get his promised heir from the LORD, and Sarai would be the child’s mother by right of ownership. But then, a shocking development occurs. A woman’s status in society was lifted when she had a child. Hagar who had been a menial handmaiden to Sarai now had status that Sarai did not have. She forgot her place in society as a slave and got what people down South used to call “uppity”. She no longer respected Sarai, and Sarai became quite jealous of Hagar. So Sarai comes storming to Abram with her complaint. She seems to blame Abram for the whole idea, even though the idea originally came from her. She considered herself wronged by the arrangement and asked the LORD to judge between her and Abram.

Abram is now caught in the unenviable position of having to decide between his wife and his concubine who was pregnant. He tells Sarai that Hagar belongs to her and is her problem. Sarai is stuck in a mess of her own making. Her solution is to mistreat Hagar to the point that Hagar is forced to run for her life. A

runaway slave woman would be in a very precarious position. She could have been hunted down by Sarai and killed or severely punished. However, it seems that Sarai was only too glad to see her go. But who would take in a pregnant slave woman?

She was facing isolation or starvation. However, the LORD intervened on her behalf at a well. It seems that a lot of important transactions in the Bible happen at wells. She was about to go into the wilderness when the LORD confronts her with “*Hagar, slave of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going?*” Hagar lets the angel of the LORD know of the treatment she has received. The angel tells her to go back to Sarai, and makes some promises about the baby she is carrying. So Hagar obeys. Goes back. And Ishmael is born.

Fifteen years later, Sarah gives birth to Isaac, and her irritation with Hagar reaches new heights. She tells Abram to get rid of Hagar. He does, but once again an angel intervenes to save Hagar and her son Ishmael’s lives, and they’re allowed to go back home to Egypt.

In her book, *Texts of Terror*, Phyllis Trible says that God here speaks a “divine word of terror to an abused, yet courageous woman.” Trible says Hagar’s story encompasses the experience of all sorts of rejected women, including the faithful but exploited maid, the black woman used by the male and abused by the female of the ruling class, the surrogate mother, the resident alien without legal recourse, the pregnant young woman who is alone, the expelled wife, the divorced mother with child, and the self-effacing female whose own identity shrinks in service to others.

I suppose for our sake it’s good that the Bible refuses to sugar-coat the story of Hagar and Sarai. It doesn’t pretend that life is easy. It doesn’t promise that God’s people always get to go home or run away from trouble when they want to. After their first encounter, God sends Hagar back to her abuser and Hagar does an amazing thing. She gives a name to God. She’s the only person in Scripture to do this, as far as I know, and she gives him a name that describes a crucial part of his nature as she experienced it. She calls him *El Roi*—“*the God who sees.*” And she says, “*I have now seen the One who sees me.*” She was not invisible. She was noticed by God himself.

Those who are powerless, like Hagar, need to be assured that God sees the things that they think no one sees. God hears their cry for deliverance. Psalm 139 says, “*I can never escape from your Spirit! I can never get away from your presence! If I go up to heaven, you are there; if I go down to the grave, you are there. If I ride the wings of the morning, if I dwell by the farthest oceans, even there your hand will guide me, and your strength will support me. I could ask the darkness to hide me and the light around me to become night—but even in darkness I cannot hide from you. To you the night shines as bright as day. Darkness and light are the same to you*” (vss. 7-12).

The LORD gives Hagar a gracious promise. She is going to have a son and would be the mother of a great race of people. He told her to name the son Ishmael and that he would be a warrior. A no-account runaway slave woman receives grace from none other than the LORD of the Universe. God takes notice of those of lowly estate. She did not ask to be put in this position. She disobeyed in that she ran away from her mistress. She was told to go back and submit herself to Sarai. Hagar responded by naming the place “*The well of the Living One who sees me.*”

Hagar returns and gives birth to Ishmael. Abram now has a son. Would this son be the promised heir? So far we see the progression of what we believe to be the heir of Abraham progress from Lot to Eliezer to Ishmael, a natural born son. It seems that the promise was fulfilled. Had not the LORD promised Hagar that she would be the mother of numerous descendants? Does that not sound like the promise God earlier gave to Abram. Was Sarai now rejected as being the mother of the promised heir? We shall find out as the story of Abram unfolds.

What can we learn from this story of jealousy and human attempts to speed up God's timetable? I think the first thing we learn is that we really cannot force God's hand and make things happen in our own strength or in our own time. When we try to do that, unexpected and undesirable things can happen. But we also learn that God is gracious even in our disobedience. We may have to live with the consequences of our actions, but God does not forsake us.

God showed great mercy to Hagar when he confronted her. By confronting her, God asked her to rethink the situation. Rethinking one's situation is the first step in repentance. The second step is to return to the right way, God's way, even though it is difficult. Hagar was returning to an abusive mistress and would have to trust the LORD's promise for her safety.

Under the Old Testament Law, the idea of repentance is tied together with restitution. If a man stole something and then felt remorse, he had to return the stolen item and pay back double the value as proof of his repentance. It was more than a "Sorry old fellow for stealing your stuff, forgive me." Yet all too often, this is our attitude. We repent towards God thinking that's all we have to do. But we must never take God and his forgiveness for granted.

Suffice it to say that God forgives us of our iniquity through Jesus Christ. We could never repay the debt we owe to God because what we owe is perfect obedience. Once we lose this, we cannot of ourselves bring it back. For this we need Christ's free and gracious gift of forgiveness. We must also realize what a great price he has paid for our rebellion against God and be grateful. But God also expects that when it is within our power to make restitution for what we owe other people that we do it. It can serve as a great witness for the Lord when we do.

We show gratitude for being forgiven by forgiving others. We who owe an unpayable debt to God can reflect this by forgiving others. We don't know how great the reception was for Hagar when she got home, but she managed to get by for a while. God must have softened Sarai's heart a little bit, considering that she could have put Hagar to death for running away.

Out of love for the Lord, let us consider Hagar's story today and resolve to follow more perfectly in our Lord's footsteps.

God sees, God hears and God delivers.

God sees every one of us! For that, we give thanks to God! Amen.