

The God Who Sees Me

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[0 : 00] Father, sometimes your word brings up issues that cause emotional turmoil for us. And Father, we don't like having emotional turmoil, but we know ultimately that when you raise issues that cause emotional turmoil, it is for our good.

We give you thanks and praise that you know the sorrows of our hearts, the sadnesses, the unfulfilled dreams that we have, and we give you thanks and praise that we can pour out our hearts to you about those things, that you are our Father in heaven and that we live in your world and that you love us.

We ask, Father, that you would gently but deeply pour the Holy Spirit upon us this morning as we read this and think about this powerful story in your word. And we give you full permission for your word to speak deeply into our hearts and form us.

And we ask this in the name of Jesus, your Son and our Savior. Amen. Please be seated. So today's sermon comes with a trigger warning.

And I'm not saying that as a joke. It's very serious. There's a particular issue which drives the story. And it's an issue which was very painful then.

[1 : 23] And it's painful for many people today. And it's painful, in fact, for some of the people in our church. And the issue which is triggered, which is very difficult, is the problem of people who would like to have children but can't.

And for some people, they would love to be able to have children, but they can't find anybody to marry. Or they've never been able to marry. Or at least not anybody that would be suitable. So they can go through their 20s and their 30s.

And then maybe, of course, if you're a woman, enter into your 40s. And now it's no longer possible to have children. And you've never been able to find somebody to marry. And it can be very, very painful.

And it's one of those pains that people have that they don't really wear on their sleeve. But it still can be a very, very deep ache and sorrow. And then, of course, there are women and men who've married.

But for a variety of reasons, for whatever reasons, they're not able to have children. Or maybe they were able to have one miracle child, but they would long to have many children. And that's a very deep pain.

[2 : 32] It can be a very deep ache that can last for a very, very long time. And once again, it's not something often that they wear on their sleeve or even feel free to talk about.

But it's a very, very real ache. And what drives the events of this story, amongst other things, is the struggle over childlessness.

And the reaction of somebody who gets pregnant in the context of somebody who's childless. Now, this story, though, in other words, for some here in the room, it can evoke and maybe even trigger very, very powerful emotions.

And the story itself doesn't directly deal with the issue of childlessness. But one of the things you need to understand about this story that we're about to read, and I know, by the way, if you went to the University of Ottawa, they would just say this is nonsense.

But that's fine. People in universities aren't always right. I know that's a bit of a shock. But historically, Christians have understood that this story that we're about to read in Genesis is actually part of a five volume.

[3 : 44] It's actually five books that are meant to be one book. It would be like if you're reading The Lord of the Rings, and The Lord of the Rings as a whole is six books. And you're supposed to read the six books understanding that there's one author.

And historically, Christians have believed that there's one ultimate, one primary author of this, which is Moses. And he wrote five different books. And then, of course, as Christians, we would now say that, in fact, this is one book out of a 66-book story, the 39 books that were written before Jesus and the 27 books that were written after Jesus.

And one of the things that if you read the whole story, so there's two things about this. And so one of them isn't directly in this story. It would be if you kept to read the rest of the story. And even a little bit, if you were to think back to how the whole story begins in Genesis chapter 1, is that one of the things which is very, very powerful is that at no point in time in the Bible does the Bible ever connect a woman's dignity or worth to the bearing of children or of even being married.

At no point in time in the Bible does it connect a woman's dignity or worth or value or being used by God or ability to bring glory to God is connected to having a child, being married or having a child. And it's actually a very, very, we're going to talk about it a little bit more later on, that part of what the Bible is, is it's, I would call it, the Bible is, the Bible understood in the context of the gospel is the perennial sexual revolution to clarify how we human beings get sexual relations and sexual knowing all messed up.

[5 : 29] And the Bible is this unending source as seen through the gospel and the power of the Holy Spirit to bring sanity to us. So there's things in our human nature that might mean, and it's not wrong for a person, for a woman to desire to have children.

That's not a wrong desire. And the Bible doesn't say it's a wrong desire. The Bible very, very clearly portrays that women who are blessed and men who are blessed to enter into holy matrimony, they are doing a good thing.

If they're blessed with children, that is a good thing. If they're not able to be married or not able to have children, those are also things, which while all of these things can be sources of sorrow, they're all things that don't affect our dignity and worth, our value, our ability to be used by God. And this is profoundly countercultural. And the other thing that we're going to see in this story is that there's the dynamic of childlessness and pregnancy, which causes conflict, massive conflict.

But one of the things that's very, very powerful about this story, and by the way, if you're watching this and you're not a Christian, and you might not understand this, that Christians have trouble with this too, our culture has sort of formed us.

[6 : 56] The stories of our culture have formed us to do one of two types of things. One is to actually try to divide characters in a story into the good guys and the bad guys.

Or the other thing, the thing which the elites like, but people tend to not want to go watch those movies or read those books. So they win awards and they sell a thousand copies.

It's to sort of despair of the idea that there's any good or evil, right or wrong at all. But for the bulk of the stories, which human beings like, we want to try to put characters in the good category and the bad category.

And one of the things which is going to be confusing for us when we read this story is that everybody's bad in the sense that everybody does some wrong things. Like everybody.

There's no hero in the story. But what you see in the story is a profound sympathy for people who do bad things.

[8 : 01] And it's hard for us to get our minds around a story. In a sense, what you're doing is the story is giving us a little bit of a glimpse about how God, the triune God, sees human beings.

He sees us as human beings. He sees the evil that we do. He sees the good that we fail to do. He doesn't minimize it and say, well, you're one of the good guys, so therefore the bad things that you do aren't as bad as the bad things the bad people do.

And for you bad people, the bad things you do are way worse because that doesn't happen ever in the Bible. What you see is without minimizing moral evil and without minimizing the consequences of moral evil, you see this constant sympathy.

This constant sympathy towards how people are presented. So here's how the story goes. If you turn in your Bibles, it's a long introduction, but it's an important introduction.

And here's how the story goes. It's Genesis chapter 16, verses 1 to the end of the story. And for those of you who have maybe not come to the church for a long time, we preach through either books of the Bible or large chunks of the Bible, and we're in the process of going through the story of Abraham.

[9 : 19] So we've done chapter 12, 13, 14, 15, and now chapter 16, and here's how the story goes. Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children.

She had a female Egyptian servant whose name was Hagar. Now just sort of pause here. One of the problems for us reading a story like this is we're all familiar with the problem.

How big or small a problem it is, of course, is itself a problem, the problem of racism and the problem of prejudice. And so for many people in our culture, hearing a story like this that instantly goes to identifying the woman as an Egyptian sounds as if it's, in a sense, racializing the story. It's bringing in prejudice. So is that what's going on in the story? Well, it's not what's going on in the story at all. What's going on here is something which is very, very important in terms of how the story forms you in a deep way.

Excuse me. You see, here's the thing. We have a person here who's in the church today who has a PhD in the Old Testament.

[10:32] And if you talk to him, he can tell you one of the things which is remarkable about not only the book of Genesis but about all of the Pentateuch is all of these intricate interconnections in the story.

And that's what's going on here. You see, Egypt is bringing up something. In Genesis chapter 12, at the beginning of these stories about Abraham, what happens is you get this profound thing that sort of launches the rest of the Bible about how God has called Abram to leave Ur of the Chaldees and he's called him to go to this land that he doesn't know where it is and that God's going to bless him and he's going to make him a blessing which blesses and he's going to bless him with the land and it's a very, very powerful moving set of verses.

And then almost immediately after that there's a famine that comes to the land and Abram, rather than trusting God or rather than seeking God's will, he tries to take matters into his own hand and he goes down to Egypt.

And if you remember the story, what he does is not only does he decide to go down to Egypt but he decides that he's going to manage the Egyptian issue by lying and by doing something, him and Sarah together decide they're going to do something terrible.

They're going to pretend that they're brother and sister and anyway, the whole thing becomes this complete and utter disaster. And in fact, actually, so when we see here now Hagar, who's an Egyptian, she probably became their servant in that incident.

[11:58] And there's other things which go on in this story because just before this, they talk about the 400 years and they're going to be in their impression and this is going to set the stage for eventually we discover it's going to be Egypt.

And so there's all these little threads that go all the way through the story that connect things in the story and echoes of each other. But the particular thing which is going on here, if you've been reading the stories from chapter 12, 13, 14, 15, and 16 and you come to this and you see this and it reminds you of the disaster that happened in chapter 12, it's saying something bad is about to happen.

In modern movies, it would be done with a certain type of music where all of a sudden the music stops in their silence and it signals to the viewer that something bad is about to happen and that's what's going on here in the text.

So, verse 2. So what's the bad thing that's about to happen? Verse 2. And Sarai said to Abram, Behold, now, sorry, behold, behold, now, the Lord has prevented me from bearing children. We'll talk about that in a moment. Go into my servant and go into my servant is sexual language. Basically, she's saying I want you to have sex with my servant.

[13:23] Go into my servant, it may be that I shall obtain children by her. And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai. 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.

And he went into Hagar and she conceived. And when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress.

So, so first of all, this sounds a bit weird to us, eh? I could just imagine me suggesting to Louise that she find a younger woman for me to marry and I'll be married to both of them.

And that would not be a conversation would go very well, nor should it. But here's the thing. What Sarah and Hagar do is the cultural wisdom of the day.

In other words, it is what the cultural equivalents of the CBC, the Liberal Party, the Conservative Party, Ottawa U, Hollywood, the Globe and Mail, all of our elites have a cultural wisdom around sexual knowledge.

[14:50] and sexual relations. And in the, the equivalents of the CBC and the Supreme Court and Parliament and the Senate and Ottawa U and, and Hollywood, the equivalents in those days would have said that what Sarah and Hagar were doing was the smart, wise way to fix the problem.

They're following the cultural wisdom of the day. And it leads to complete and utter disaster. The disaster is going to get worse as the story goes on.

There's going to be demands for justice which is really just masking a desire to hurt, not for justice but to hurt, to crush, to oppress, to afflict.

There's going to be abandonment and running away and there's only going to be further heartache as they follow the wisdom of the world. This in fact is why you see that the Bible's teaching is part of the continual true sexual revolution, the perennial sexual revolution.

You see, if you watch Hollywood and read stories and listen to the experts, they continually tell us different ways to live sexually in the world which they say are wise.

[16:17] And the stories and the movies never show in fact the folly of following the wisdom of the world. So in the wisdom of our world, there is pressure on women to have sexual knowing with their boyfriends because they believe that unless they have, they sexually know their boyfriends, their boyfriends will not date them and they'll never marry and they want to marry.

Or there is pressure put on young men and young women and older men and older women that they need to have sexual knowing of many people because how else will you be prepared for marriage unless you have sexual knowing of many people.

And the cultural wisdom of the day says that if you want to have a long and happy marriage, you need to live together first because that's the way that you find out whether you're in fact suited to be with this other person.

And this is all just the commonplace wisdom of the world. What they don't say is because God has designed sexual knowing as a powerful unitive force within the person that when a woman sleeps with a man and one or both have absolutely no intention of ever marrying them, all that happens is that there's a type of tearing in the person in a hardening of relations between the sexes and a distrust.

And that's not even calling, that's not even connected to things like sexually transmitted diseases which can in fact in many cases lead to infertility or to unwanted pregnancies and abortions.

[18:10] And there's no type of sense that the supposed wisdom of living together to prepare you for marriage that all of the statistics for decades consistently show that people who lived together before marriage are much more likely to divorce than to remain married.

Nor that the pressure to sexually know many different people to somehow prepare you for marriage, that to sexually know many people only forms you to have sex with lots of people.

Doesn't help you or form you at all to sexually know just one person, your husband or your wife. In fact, the sexual wisdom of our world causes chaos.

And the wisdom of the Bible, because you see one of the things in what happens in this story, and it's a subtle thing, but it's very powerful and cumulative. The wisdom of the world in those days was polygamy was good amongst other things.

And one of the things that the Bible consistently shows is that whenever polygamy or these other things happen, all that happens is heartache and chaos.

[19:27] And that the wisdom, portrayed especially in Exodus and Deuteronomy, where it talks about you shall not commit adultery, that that is something which opens the door to a perpetual sexual revolution.

that points you towards sanity and wholeness and health. So they follow the wisdom of the world, and Hagar successfully gets pregnant, and Sarah is crushed, Hagar's arrogant and contemptuous, and we can all see that this is going to be a recipe for a great time together.

In sitcoms, of course, what would happen is there'd be a period of conflict. They'd all come to their senses, they'd have a group hug, and they'd live together happily ever after, and that, of course, is completely and utterly unrealistic to most of human experience, but what is portrayed in sitcoms, and what we think should happen to us.

Well, how does it work out? Look what happens in verse 5. Sarah 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. The same word for contempt is also the word for curse.

[21 : 04] She curses, Sarah. May the Lord judge between you and me. But Abram said to Sarah, Behold, your servant is in your power. Do to her as you please.

Then Sarah dealt harshly with her, and Hagar fled from Sarah. So here we see just a perfect picture of human life.

Why is it that we can't accept responsibility for the wrong that we do? Sarah blames Abram. Abram shuffles off responsibility. Sarah claims that she wants justice, which is what she's trying to talk to Abram about what she doesn't really want justice.

She wants to smash. That's what she wants. She doesn't want justice. She wants to smash. And so she smashes. And Hagar flees.

And now the focus shifts to Hagar. Sarah, in a sense, disappears from the story, at least this incident, moment, and now the focus goes on Hagar. How is God going to deal with all of this?

[22 : 13] Well, let's look. Verse 7, the angel of the Lord found her, now she is Hagar, not Sarai, but found Hagar, by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur.

Now, just sort of pause here for a second. It's just a very tiny bit of the story, but remember, stories form us, and one of the things which is subtly forming us here at the very, very beginning of the Old Testament is that God goes seeking Hagar, the one who treats Sarai with contempt, the one who curses Sarai out.

God goes looking for Hagar. Hagar. See, every single one of us who have become a Christian, God sought you before you sought him.

That's the pattern of the Bible. The Lord seeks you, and he seeks you even when you've done things which aren't very good. The Lord seeks Hagar, and the Lord finds Hagar.

Verse 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.

[23 : 34] The angel of the Lord said to her, return to your mistress and submit to her. Now, that causes problems for us. I don't know if you're aware of the fact, but the most popular tattoo in Canada is the phrase, I love to submit.

Haven't you found that is the case? Like, I don't know, you know, every time I go into a Starbucks, it's like every person, I think, what are you, a herd of independent minds? You all like to tattoo on your arms where everybody can see I love to submit?

No, of course, this is like a completely terrible thing. This is so un-Canadian. In fact, for many people looking at this, they go, oh, come on, good grief. Like, how, what? Listen, the Bible shouldn't be telling her to submit.

Like, so how would Hollywood tell it? Well, here's the thing. Here's the thing where the Bible is wise. There is no option to Hagar other than submitting.

The question isn't, see, that's what Hollywood and the wisdom of the world likes to try to tell us. The option for George is, will I submit? Or will I be an independent, powerful, self-asserting, autonomous, self-actualizing person that everybody should applaud?

[24 : 55] Should I do that or should I submit? Well, who's going to pick submitting when that's the option? But that's not the option in life. Bob Dylan, in his Christian phase, put it perfectly. You've got to serve somebody.

It might be the devil, or it might be the Lord, but you got to serve somebody. The question isn't, will you submit or not? The question is always who or what will you submit to?

So, if you get upset with the story, well, what's Hagar going to do? Hagar's going to go back. Here she is a single, unattached woman in a patriarchal society.

She's going to go back and be somebody's slave. She's not going to go to Egypt and start the equivalent of Shopify or Amazon and be unbelievably rich.

She's going to submit to somebody. But what does he tell her? And we're going to see, in a sense, the promise which comes immediately after that.

[26 : 02] Remember, if you go back and you read Genesis chapter 12 verses 1, 2, and 3, one of the things which characterizes the blessing that God is to give Abram, is that Abram is blessed to be a blessing.

So what he is telling Hagar to do is to go back to the one who's being blessed to be a blessing, because if she goes back, she will be blessed.

She goes to Egypt, slavery, she goes to poverty, she goes back, and she's going to have to submit, or she can go back and submit.

God is going to deal with things so that she's blessed. Look, in fact, what happens. Verse 10. So verse 9, return to your mistress and submit to her.

The angel of the Lord, verse 10, also said to her, I will surely multiply your offspring so that they cannot be numbered for multitude. And the angel of the Lord said to her, behold, you are pregnant, and you shall bear a son, you shall call his name Ishmael, because the Lord has listened to your affliction.

[27 : 16] He shall be a wild donkey of a man. That's an image of a person who loves freedom, but at the same time he's going to have a problem. His freedom, his love of freedom will mean he won't get along with people.

Verse 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. But the thing is, right, there's a prophecy of some other things that are going to go on there, but fundamentally if she goes back and submits to the one whom the Lord is blessing to be a blessing, is that she will be blessed. Her son will be safely born. Her son will marry. her son will have children, and she will be a mom who has a child, and who has grandchildren, and great grandchildren, of course, in those days she would die before any of that would be seen, probably.

But that is what God is promising her and offering her. Verse 13, this is very significant. 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. Therefore the well was called Bir Lahai Roy. It lies between Kadesh and Bered and Hagar bore Abram a son, and Abram called the name of his son whom Hagar bore Ishmael.

[28 : 49] In other words, Abram comes back, there's peace which goes back there. Abram was 86 years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram. But here's the thing, trying to wrap this up, here's the thing which is very significant about this.

If you go back to verse 13, you are a God of seeing. In the original language, the same name sentence can be understood in different senses all at the same time.

In English, of course, you have to pick one. And it also means not just you are a God of seeing, but you are a God who sees me. And it also could be understood as you are the God I see.

And then the thing about the well is that there's a living God who sees me. You know, here's one of the things. things. I mean, one of the problems, of course, to go back to the thing which I mentioned at the first, is, of course, one of the reasons that people can feel so hard done by and hurt, and hard done by, I didn't mean to say it that way, can be very hurt, is that they haven't been able to find, they'd love to be married, they'd love to have children, they aren't able to find it, and it's a very, very hard thing, and at some point in time, they start to feel invisible.

It's one of the things which is also hard, not just for women like that, but for men, is the feeling of being invisible. It's the problem of the poor, they are invisible.

[30 : 35] One of the things I had several people tell me who live in the downtown core, is that when we had the lockdown, especially the first lockdown, what did they say to me? They never realized there were so many street people in Ottawa.

Why did they never realize there were so many street people in Ottawa? Because they're often invisible amidst all the others, and when there's nobody there, they're no longer invisible. What is part of the problem with aging?

Often with age, you start to feel invisible, unseen, and so we have this very, very powerful way of describing the true and living God.

Not the God of Canadians, but the God of the Bible. The God of Canadians is often just an impersonal force or some type of wispy type of thing, but the God of the Bible is not an invisible force, it's not something wispy.

The God of the Bible is the true and living God, and the true and living God is the one who sees you. You are not invisible to the true and living God, and he looks upon you with sympathy.

[31 : 41] He sees very clear-eyed the wrong you've done and the good you've done, but you're never invisible to the true and living God. And this becomes even more, as the Bible continues, and as you learn more about the true and living God and the different ways that the true and living God sees, both with justice and mercy and with compassion and with sympathy, and it culminates in the New Testament.

John's Gospel, in particular, the clearest. In John's Gospel, it's very, very clear that when you see Jesus, you are seeing the living God. And the way that you see the living God most completely and perfectly in the Gospel of John is when you see Jesus dying upon the cross.

And one of the things which is so remarkable about the seven last words that Jesus has from the cross is the way that even as he is hanging on the cross dying, he sees.

He sees the thief upon the cross. He sees the disciple whom he loves. He sees his mother. He sees.

He sees you. You see God perfectly revealed when you see Jesus dying upon the cross. He sees God and you are seeing the God who sees you and sees me.

[33 : 15] The promise that God would be a blessing to Abram and Sarah and that part of that profound mystery of blessing isn't as you can see that they were perfect.

they are not perfect. But from them believing the promise you see from them believing the promise eventually they will give birth to the son who will give birth to a son who will give birth to a son that down the road and down the road and down the road is great Abram's greater son who dies on the cross so that Abram and Sarah can be made right with the true and living God.

And for Hagar potentially. but in the cross you see the God you see God and you see the God who sees you.

You're not invisible. Just in closing part of the great lesson of this text is not just to bring us to this point this profound insight.

Remember I said that one of the things which is complicated for us when we read this story is we want to put people in good guys and bad guys and downgrade their badness and upgrade their goodness or do the opposite depending on what sides we are and we don't see that happening in the text.

[34 : 32] We see the wrong. We see the hurt. We see the sorrow. We see the sadness and we don't see it and we see it seen with sympathy and the steps to deliver people from oppression and to bring people into love.

To live out of the promise that comes from the gospel that when Jesus dies for you on the cross he sees you and he died for you and to realize that he has come and sought me the promise God comes and gives me this great gift of grace when I do not am worthy of it and I do not deserve it. You see part of Sarah's problem was she thought God couldn't accomplish things and so she needed to do it for herself.

She stopped living out of the promise and thought that God needed her power to fix the things that his power couldn't manage. and that's always a consistent problem and danger for us who are Christians thinking that somehow we need to use our power because God's power isn't enough. You see what happens is it will happen now in the rest of the story in chapter 17 and 18 and 19 and 20 and 21 and 22 is that when Abram and Sarah are being faithful they live out of the promise.

[36 : 08] And as the promise of grace and of blessing becomes real to their heart God will at the same time put into their heart the things that they need to do out of obedience and gratitude to the promise.

Not because his hand is short or weak but because the very promise of the blessing and the promise forms you to do things in a way that don't bring your own power first and foremost and you're not trying to be God.

It just flows out of being formed by the promise. And that's how the Christian life is to be. Not that if I don't do this God can't get it done.

But what has God done for me? And as that becomes more real to my heart you look around and you say gosh I got to do something about the poor. Or I've got to do something to help the city be more prosperous.

Or I've got to do something to help the victims of violence. Or I've got to do something about the world where there's true poverty. I've got to be more generous.

[37 : 27] As you look upon the generosity of Christ you say gosh I've got to be more generous. as the gospel forms you realize you know what I need to forgive. And that's a very very very different way of living than thinking you've got to forgive so God will forgive you.

Or you've got to be generous because unless you give that money God can't do anything about it. It's a very very very very different way to live than to live out of the fullness of seeing the God who sees me.

Please stand. Nothing special or mystical about standing but you've been sitting and you're going to sit again in prayer and it's good to have a bit of a stretch.

Let's bow our heads in prayer as we stand. Father we give you thanks and praise that you see us.

That there has never been a point in time in any of our lives where you have not seen us.

That you see us as we really are. You see us in the things you see the things about us that are eccentric maybe a bit kooky. You see the things about us that are good and true and beautiful and wise.

[38 : 45] You see the things about us that are wrong the wrong we've done. You see us you see us perfectly and seen as perfectly still you love us and send your son to be our savior to die upon the cross and as he dies on the cross he sees each one of us with eyes of love.

We ask Lord that you would grip us with the gospel. We ask Lord that you would help us to put to death any sense of boasting or rivalry that somehow or another unless I do what only I can do you cannot get good things done in this world.

Father put that to death within us. But make the gospel Father the promise the blessing the knowledge that you see us and love us and redeem us Father make that more and more real to our heart and as you make it more real to our heart help us Father to live out of that grace and to do the things that your grace leads us to do not so that you will love us but out of an overflow of the wonder and the marvel of your grace and love for us.

And so Father we ask that your Holy Spirit would do that wonderful and deep work within our lives because we cannot do it in our own strength. And Father if there are any who are here or watching who have not yet recognized that Jesus is the one who sees them and loves them we ask Father that you would turn their heart to Jesus that they like us would trust him as their savior and their Lord.

Lord and we ask all of these things in the name of Jesus your son and our savior and all God's people said amen.