

The God who sees me

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[0 : 0 0] Genesis 16. How does the Lord God deal with people like you and me?! For quite a lot of us, a lot of the time, whether you call yourself a Christian or not, our day-to-day lives are actually such a tangled mess of wrong desires and screw-ups and failures and anger and hurt and shame and guilt. Under the surface, maybe on the surface, we fail to trust our God.

Some of us spend some of our days plotting and planning to get our own way. We manipulate people around us. We ill-treat those close to us. We're very good at shifting blame onto other people. We want to get our own back on those who hurt us. We do damage to people and we get damaged. It's no surprise that families break up and communities break down all around us and in the church because our lives are such a tangled, painful, sinful mess so much of the time. How does the Lord God deal with people like us?

How does he deal with people who screw up and fail, who do damage and get damaged? And we've just read from Genesis 16. And in verses 1 to 6, do you see what happens? We zoom down into Abraham's family life and what do you discover? What a painful, sinful mess.

And verse 1 is what starts things off. Now Sarai, Abraham's wife, had borne him no children. I wonder if you can imagine how that was for them as a family.

Back in chapter 11, verse 30, at the start of the Abraham and Sarai story, we heard, now Sarai was childless because she was not able to conceive. Although it's true that some people in today's world try to celebrate child-free lives, who'd want a baby?

[2 : 1 1] I can drink when I want, I can sleep when I want, I can do what I want in my fun and easy life. The truth is that children are a God-given blessing to us. It's why God has created our bodies as he has done, that we might procreate.

And to be unable to conceive, to not be able to, can feel so devastatingly painful. But in Genesis 12, the Lord had made an enormous promise to this family. He'd said to Abraham, I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you. It's a promise. You'll become a large population in a large territory. I'm going to grow your family and your descendants will be as many as the stars in the sky, safe and secure and blessed by me, says God. And for Abraham and his unable to conceive wife, simply overwhelming promises to hold on to. Yes, we'll trust him, we'll trust him.

And yet by chapter 16 and verse 1, it's 10 long years later, Sarai, Abraham's wife, who is 75 years old at this point, has borne him no children.

And you and I are not Abraham and Sarai. God does not promise each of us the blessing of children, he doesn't. But you can imagine, can't you, how it was for them. The month by month anticipation, now slowly fading as the years go by. No swelling belly, no new life inside.

He made promises and we've trusted him, yet still nothing. Actually, so much of life as a Christian is about waiting for God to fulfil his promises, you know.

[4 : 0 7] He has promised he will grow his church and multiply his people. He has promised he will come one day and he'll bring in a new heaven and a new earth and we'll see him and we'll cry no more. When will he come?

When will my suffering end? When will he take me home to be with him? And we wait and it hurts the rest. And the years go by, yet still nothing.

In Genesis 16, after 10 long years and no child, Sarah's patience with God runs out. And so she takes matters into her own hands.

Now Sarah, Abraham's wife, had borne him no children. But she had an Egyptian slave named Hagar. And so she said to Abraham, the Lord has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my slave.

Perhaps I can build a family through her. And this kind of social practice was acceptable in some cultures back then. You use someone else's womb to get me a child. It happens today too, in different ways. It doesn't make it right though. But God is not doing anything. And Sarah's desperate.

[5 : 34] And we get this, don't we? Time's running out. And I'm getting too old. And I want a partner.

And we must have children. We'll try anything. What should happen now in Genesis 16? Abraham should say, Sarah, I know. Not like this.

I know it's hard, but we'll trust our God and we'll wait. But he doesn't, spineless man. Abraham agreed to what Sarah said. Just like Adam in the garden in Genesis 3, he listened to the voice of his wife and together they sin.

It is sin what takes place here. It's disobedience to God. In the garden of Eden, Eve took the forbidden fruit and gave it to her husband and he ate.

Here in verse 3 now, a deliberate echo. After Abraham had been living in Canaan 10 years, Sarah, his wife, took her Egyptian slave, Hagar, and gave her to her husband to be his wife.

[6 : 50] And he slept with Hagar. He went into her and she conceived.

Sarah's desperate plot, Abraham's weak agreement, Hagar's body used. The plot, the sin. Next, the toxic fallout. And what a complicated, painful mess it is.

For when Hagar knew she was pregnant, she began to despise her mistress. For sure, Hagar was the powerless victim. But now, as her belly swells, she turns to Sarah and despises her.

It's not all that hard, mistress. We did it first time. Look how fertile I am. Verse 5, more fallout.

Then Sarah said to Abraham, you are responsible for the wrong I'm suffering. Really? I put my slave in your lap and now that she knows she's pregnant, she despises me.

[8 : 14] May the Lord judge between you and me. Here's another moment. Abraham could lead his family in fresh repentance and confession, but no.

Spineless man. Your slave is in your hands, Abraham said. Do with her whatever you like. Then Sarah ill-treated Hagar.

Ill-treated is mistreated, afflicted. Like what the Israelites will later endure in Egypt. Did she corner her and hit her? Did she verbally abuse her, her pregnant slave girl?

Did she do both? Sarai ill-treated Hagar. So she fled from her. Hagar upped and ran into the desert. What a painful and sinful mess. Do you not think? This is God's chosen family here. Abraham, the father of the Abrahamic religions.

[9 : 14] This couple, the ones through whom God's going to bless the world. And they're all screwed up in this mess of failing faith and desperation and manipulation and sin and hurt.

And it's grim and it's rotten. So what? I think it's very striking that the Bible doesn't try to cover over the raw reality of what we're like as human beings.

And he doesn't cover over the raw reality of what we're like as his people, the church. I've got an old iPhone there.

The new Google Pixel 6 phone. I mentioned this a while back. Apparently it has a magic eraser feature built in. Anybody got one? You take a selfie. And then you use the magic eraser mode to circle and get rid of the cloud in the sky.

And the ugly person in the background. And the wart on your face. Circle. Delete. And what you're left with on your phone is a lovely perfect picture that you can share on social media.

[10 : 23] To show how wonderful your life is and how perfect your skin is. Except it's not real. It's a touched up, cleaned up, fake photo. It's a touched up, cleaned up, and a lot of people are like.

Genesis 16 does not use the magic eraser mode. Circling and getting rid of. Sarai plotting and Abraham agreeing and Hagar used and Hagar despising and Sarai hitting.

Leaving us with a kind of cleaned up picture of perfect saints. No, this is what they're really like.

Warts and all. And God wants us to see this because this is what we're really like too.

Warts and all. Isn't it? If we're honest. Not exactly the same situation. But our patience with God can run out.

You're not doing what you promised you would. We can be tempted to plot and plan and take matters into our own hands. We manipulate our partners.

[11 : 29] We give in. We shift blame. We won't take responsibility. In our lives we choose to sin. We can be sexually cruel.

We can take advantage of others. We can take advantage of others. Having been used, abused even, we can get our own back, gloating and despising.

We can lash out. We can use our physical and emotional power to hurt. See the situation here with Abraham and Sarah and Hagar and ask who's in the wrong and who's been damaging and who is being damaged.

And the truth is it's so complicated and painful and sinful what takes place here. Because life and relationships in God's world are like that for us.

As we struggle and fail to trust our God. Genesis 16, scene 1. What a painful, sinful mess. Here's our question this morning.

[12:40] How does the Lord deal with people like you and me? When we, like them, screw up and fail, when we do damage, when we get damaged, how does the Lord respond to people like us in all our hurt and being hurt?

Does he turn away? Does he cast us off in disgust? The answer is he doesn't. He doesn't.

Come to scene 2 now and verses 7 to 14. Scene 1, what a painful, sinful mess. Now, verse 7 following, what a wonderful, caring God.

In chapter 17 next Sunday, we'll see God respond to Abraham and Sarai, those who took the initiative in this sin and hurt Hagar. But here, straight away in chapter 16, the Lord comes first to Hagar.

She's the Egyptian slave. Her body has been used through no choice of her own. She's pregnant. She has sinfully despised her mistress.

[13:51] She has been beaten. And she has fled. One damaged, unmarried, foreign slave woman in the wilderness by herself. I don't know whether in this story you identify most easily with Abraham or Sarai or Hagar.

Whether you're a man or a woman, young or old, unmarried or married, it could be that in your life you feel yourself to be in some way like Hagar. Because of the things you've experienced in your life.

Notice here, neither Abraham nor Sarai come after her. Why would they? She's a slave girl. And because of who she is and what's happened to her, you might think, is there anybody who would have anything to do with her?

The Lord does. Look at this through with me. Verse 7. The angel of the Lord found Hagar near a spring in the desert.

It was the spring that's beside the road to Shur. She's on the road back to Egypt. And the Lord's angel found her. Sent from God's heavenly court to seek her, the angel found her.

[15:05] This encounter in the wilderness, it's so personal. Having found her, he said, Hagar, slave of Sarai.

Where have you come from and where are you going? Sarai just spoke of her as my slave.

Abraham, your slave. She was just an object, a possession to be used.

Hagar, says the Lord. Her name. She's named. She's known. She's valued. Where have you come from and where are you going?

I'm running away from my mistress Sarai, she answered. Maybe we'd imagine God would say, keep running and I'll go with you. But he doesn't. She is still Sarai's servant.

She's bearing Abraham's son. She belongs to that family. And so the angel of the Lord told her, go back to your mistress and submit to her. Along with her return, she'll receive great blessing.

[16:07] The angel added, I'll increase your descendants so much that they'll be too numerous to count. A great nation will come from you. The angel of the Lord also said to her, you're now pregnant and you'll give birth to a son.

You shall name him Ishmael. For the Lord has heard of your misery. Your son's name, which I give to you, a daily reminder that God hears your misery.

And he hears your cries. Although life for your son will not be easy. He'll be a wild donkey of a man. His hand will be against everyone and everyone's hand against him. And he will live in hostility towards all his brothers. In verse 13, Hagar responds.

The God of heaven, the Lord, has heard her misery and found her in the wilderness and spoken to her by name. There won't be a straightforward and simple happy ending for her.

[17:06] She will have to return to her mistress. She'll give birth to Ishmael. It will be hard work. But here's the thing. Hagar has been seen. She's been seen.

Verse 13. She gave this name to the Lord who spoke to her. The only person in the Bible who names God. You are the God who sees me.

For she said, I've now seen the one who sees me. She's been a part of the painful, sinful mess in Abraham's household. She's been sinned against for sure.

She's wrongly despised her mistress, been beaten and damaged and she's fled. And you'd imagine in the wilderness for Hagar, a mix of hurt, lostness, shame and guilt.

As for us, sometimes in the tangled mess of our lives. And yet the Lord sees her. The Lord cares for her.

[18:06] The Lord comes to her. The Lord will bless her. You are the God who sees me. She names him.

And here in the wilderness, that means everything. It means everything to her. That is why the well was called Be'er-le-hoi-roi, which means well of the living one who sees me.

It's still there between Kadesh and Bered. And so having returned to Abraham's household, Abraham bore, Hagar bore Abraham a son. And Abraham gave the name Ishmael to the son she'd born.

And Abraham was 86 years old when Hagar bore him Ishmael. Genesis 16, you know, is such a good news gospel chapter. Such a good news gospel chapter as the Lord, in his kindness and mercy, seeks out and comes to Hagar.

It's such a wonderful gospel chapter because as the Lord was with Hagar, so he is with us today through the Lord Jesus Christ.

[19:15] Because in his wonderful grace, the Lord God does not leave us in the painful, sinful mess of our lives. When you and I screw up and fail to trust him, when we do damage and are damaged, he does not cast us off in disgust.

In Luke 19, verse 10, summing up his earthly mission, the Lord Jesus Christ said of himself, the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.

That is the character of the Lord in Genesis 16 and the heart of the gospel today. That knowing and seeing all we've ever done, Jesus came into the world to seek us out and find us, we who are lost in our sins.

His care for us finds concrete expression in his death on the cross, where he bore on his shoulders the sin and guilt and shame of millions of people he knows by name.

And he died on the cross for us so that he might restore us to our God. And today, to all like Hagar who are guilty and ashamed and hurting, to all who cry out to him, he hears your misery.

[20:35] He sees you. He cares for you. He is with you. And he knows you by name. He would have you share bread with him right now in the Lord's Supper.

And he, the God who sees you, knows you and is for you, will save you for all eternity. He will. Because that is what he's like.

And that is what he does. What a painful, sinful mess our lives and our world. What a wonderful, caring Lord.

And let me lead us in a prayer. Let's pray. The angel of the Lord found her.

The Lord has heard of your misery. You are the God who sees me. Thank you, our Father and our God, that you do not cast off in disgust those who sin against you, those who bear shame for what has been done to them, those who are mired in mess and sin and guilt like us.

[22:03] Thank you that in the Lord Jesus Christ, you have sought us out. You know us by name. You have the power.

And you have acted to restore us to yourself. Thank you that in this world, knowing our hearts, you're a wonderful, caring, loving Lord.

We give you thanks in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Thank you.