

Pastor Steven J. Cole
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship
123 S. Beaver St.
Flagstaff, AZ 86001
www.fcfonline.org

THE GOD WHO SEES

Genesis 16:7-16

By

Steven J. Cole

September 1, 1996

Copyright, 1996

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are from
The New American Standard Bible,
Copyright, The Lockman Foundation

September 1, 1996
Genesis Lesson 34

The God Who Sees
Genesis 16:7-16

Dr. James Boice tells a poignant story about an incident from his childhood. In the closing days of World War II, when Boice was seven, his father was in the Air Force, stationed in Louisiana, with the family. Many servicemen were being discharged, but since there was the risk that discharge orders could be canceled if a man didn't leave immediately after receiving them, Boice's family had begun to pack.

When the orders came, school was in session, so James was told that the family would leave as soon as he got home that afternoon. He was so excited he could hardly wait. He jumped off the school bus, ran up the steps to his house, and found that the door was locked. Surprised and a bit subdued, he ran around to the back door and found that it was locked too. At last he found a window he knew would be unlocked, pried it open and crawled through. To his shock, the room was empty. So was the entire house. As this seven-year-old boy made his way slowly from room to room, he got the sinking sensation that in the rush of packing and leaving quickly before the orders were canceled, his family had forgotten and left him behind. Actually his parents had gone off on a last minute errand and were waiting outside in the car for him to come home from school while he was inside wandering through the empty house. But it was a sad little boy they saw backing out of the window after his tour of the abandoned house. (Boice, *Genesis* [Zondervan], 1:295-296.)

It's terrible to feel abandoned by your parents. It's also tough to feel abandoned by God. Most of us have felt that way at one time or another. Maybe things were going well and suddenly the bottom dropped out of your life. In the confusion of the events, you wondered, "Where is God in all this?"

That's how Hagar must have felt when she fled from Sarai. Things had seemed to look up for a brief moment. Her lowly status as a servant had changed when Abram, according to the custom of the day, had taken her to produce a child on behalf of the barren

Sarai. But when Hagar became pregnant, she communicated an air of superiority toward Sarai, who then mistreated her. Finally, things got so bad that Hagar took off in the direction of her homeland, out through the desert. It was a dangerous thing for a woman to do. She could have been abused or taken captive by nomadic traders. Being pregnant, she could have lost her baby from the rigors of traveling in that rugged terrain. Having had to escape, probably in the night, she would have had few supplies. But somehow she made it to a spring of water in the desert and sat down exhausted.

Hagar knew about Abram's God, the living and true God. She must have wondered if that God knew or cared about her situation. No doubt she was confused. What could a pregnant, single woman do, even if she reached her homeland? If she had family there, they would have been too poor to help her. Her future was uncertain, her past too painful to think about. She felt abandoned by everyone on earth and forgotten by God in heaven.

It's in that context that we read, "Now the angel of the Lord found her" (16:7). What a beautiful picture of our compassionate God, who is concerned even for this poor, confused servant girl! The angel tells her what to do and then promises that he will multiply her descendants through the child she is carrying. Hagar, encouraged and awed by this experience, gives a new name to God-- "El Roi," "the God who sees." She then returns to Abram and Sarai and Ishmael is born.

There are two dominant themes in these verses: First, God sees Hagar (16:7-12); and second, Hagar sees God (16:13-16). God saw Hagar's affliction; as a result, Hagar saw God's mercy and submitted to Him. Applying it to us, we can put it:

Because God sees our affliction, we can
see His mercy and submit to Him.

This story is encouraging if you are suffering and feel that God has abandoned you. He has not forgotten; He sees your affliction. Because He sees, you can see His mercy, and submit to Him.

1. God sees our affliction (16:7-12).

God saw Hagar's affliction: "The angel of the Lord found her" Isn't that great! The Good Shepherd went looking for her. God

is a seeking God! We may think that we found Him, but the reality is, He found us. We were lost and confused, wandering away from Him. He came looking and found us! If you know Christ as Savior, you realize that you didn't think, "I need a little help in my life. I'll decide to let Jesus be my Savior." The Son of Man did not come to seek and to save those who needed a little help. He came to seek and to save those who are lost (Luke 19:10)! It is our sinful pride that keeps us from seeing our true condition: We are lost! We must own up to that fact. But the good news is, no one, not even a lowly Egyptian servant girl, is too lost in God's sight. The angel of the Lord found Hagar!

Who is this angel of the Lord? There is debate among scholars, but I believe that it is the Lord Jesus Christ in a preincarnate appearance. In verse 13 it is stated that it was the Lord who spoke to Hagar. (See also, Gen. 18:1-2, 17, 22, 27, 33, 19:1; 22:11-12; 24:7; 31:11, 13; 48:15-16.) So Hagar was found by and was speaking to the Lord Jesus Christ!

Hagar could flee from the presence of Sarai, but she couldn't flee from the presence of the Lord. You can try to run from difficult circumstances, but you can't hide from the God who put you there. Notice the irony of verse 8: The Lord knows Hagar's name and her station in life, yet He asks her where she has come from and where she is going. Wherever in the Bible you find God asking a question, you can assume that He is not looking for information. He wants the person to think about the situation. The Lord wanted Hagar to think about two things: *Where have you come from?* and, *Where are you going?* She had come from being Sarai's maid. As such, she was not free to flee from her duty. Where was she going? She really didn't know. But, clearly, she wasn't seeking after the Lord and His will.

Those are good questions to ask yourself when you're in a difficult situation: Where have you come from? Did God allow that trial for some reason? Where are you going? Did you seek His permission to run? Our real need in a bad situation is not to escape, but to seek and to submit to the Lord. The Lord has some bad news and some good news for Hagar, and for us, at such times. First, the bad news: Hagar needed to go back and submit to Sarai. The good news: then God would bless her.

A. The “bad” news: our need in affliction is to submit to God.

We don’t like to hear that. We sputter, “But, Lord, don’t you know how I’ve been mistreated? Don’t you know how bad it is? Give me the blessing first, then I’ll submit.” But God’s way is, submit first; then He blesses. Obedience always comes before blessing.

Submit is a dirty word in our day. We Americans have a history of not submitting to anyone who oppresses us. Our country was founded because the settlers said, “The king can’t do that to us! We’ll revolt!” If we’re treated unfairly or harshly, we stand up for our rights. The very word, “submit,” makes us mad. We don’t like it.

But the Lord, who made us and who knows our real need, says, “Your number one need in a time of trial is to learn to submit to Me. And you don’t learn to submit to Me by running from the situation.” Ouch! Can’t you feel yourself wanting to fight? Don’t you want to cry out, “But, God, You don’t understand!”? But He does understand. He says to Hagar, “Return to your mistress, and submit yourself to her authority.”

The book of First Peter is about submission to authority in a time of trial. The Christians to whom Peter wrote were suffering, some as slaves under harsh masters, some as wives under disobedient husbands, all as citizens under an unjust government. Peter’s word to each group of victims was, “Submit” (1 Pet. 2:13, 18; 3:1). He sums it up, “Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time, casting all your anxiety upon Him, because He cares for you” (1 Pet. 5:6-7). Your number one need in a time of trial is to submit to God--humble yourself under His mighty hand. He is in control of the circumstances. He cares for you; don’t doubt His love. There are lessons which our rebellious nature cannot learn except by submitting to God in trials, even when we’re being treated wrongly or unfairly.

Some people never grow in the Lord because they have a habit of running from difficult situations where He has put them for their training. They had problems with their parents as teenag-

ers, so they rebelled. They get a job and have problems, so they quit. They get married and have conflict, so they walk away from it. They seek counseling, but they don't like what the counselor tells them, so they either quit or else look for a counselor who agrees with them. They join a church, but can't get along with the people or don't like something, so they find another church. But guess what? They discover that the new church has the same problems.

At some point they need to realize that they're carrying their own baggage with them. As Pogo said, "We have met the enemy, and he is us." The problem is, they've never learned to submit to God and to allow Him to use the authority structures He has ordained to sandpaper off their rough edges. God sees our need in our affliction: To submit to Him in the difficult situations where He has sovereignly placed us.

While that's a difficult word, it's also a merciful word. As I said, Hagar may have suffered greatly or even perished if she had continued her flight into the wilderness. God often mercifully checks us in our disobedience to prevent us from even greater damage. The way of obedience is hard, but the way of disobedience is even more difficult. It was better for Hagar to be associated with Abram and Sarai, even with Sarai's harshness, than with her native Egyptians, who worshiped false gods. It's better for you to be in a local church, with all the imperfect people and their faults, than to be in the world, where God is not known.

Some of you may be in trying situations right now, but you haven't submitted to God. Maybe your pattern has been to run from one difficult situation to the next, always blaming others or complaining about bad luck, but never humbling yourself under God's mighty hand. You won't know His blessing until submit to Him in whatever circumstances He has placed you. It's hard news, but it's not really bad.

- B. The good news: When we submit to God in our affliction, He will bless us and our descendants.

The Lord says that He heard Hagar's affliction, not her prayer (16:11). Whether Hagar was calling out to the Lord or not, we don't know. But the Lord graciously hears our affliction, even when we fail to call out to Him as we should. But He not only

hears and sees our affliction, He sees the future after our affliction is over. The Lord goes on to tell Hagar how He will greatly multiply her descendants. Concerning the son in her womb, the Lord tells her to name him Ishmael, which means "God hears," because the Lord heard her affliction. Every time she called her son's name, Hagar would be reminded of God's faithfulness, that He had heard her affliction.

God reveals that Ishmael will be a wild donkey of a man, meaning, a strong, independent, untamed man. He will be a fighter, whose hand will be against everyone. In the last line of verse 12, the word means both "to the east of" and "over against." Both were true; Ishmael's Arab descendants both lived to the east of and were over against (in opposition to) Isaac's descendants. There is a divine mystery here: God sovereignly chose Isaac and his line through Jacob while He set Ishmael and his descendants against His chosen people. And yet Ishmael and his race were responsible for their sin and rebellion against God. All we can say is, "How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways!" (Rom. 11:33). But it was enough for Hagar to know that her son would not, like her, be enslaved, and that he would prosper. Thus it was a word of hope to her.

There's an application here for us: God allows U-turns in the desert! Even though we've run from God, if we will turn around and submit to Him in our trials, His blessing will be on us and our descendants. We can be assured that He will work out His sovereign plan for us and for our children if we will make a U-turn and submit to Him.

So the first great theme in these verses is that God saw Hagar. But Hagar also saw God. When she realized that God had seen her, she responded by acknowledging that she had seen God and she named both the Lord and the spring after her experience. Then she returned to Abram and Sarai in submission to the Lord. Even so, when we realize that God sees us in our affliction, we will gain a fresh glimpse of God.

2. We see God in His mercy and submit to Him (16:13-16).

Hagar wouldn't have seen the Lord if it hadn't been for her trial. God often uses trials to open us up to some fresh vision of

Him which we would have missed if we hadn't been in the difficult situation. "Hagar called the name of the Lord who spoke to her, 'You are a God who sees'" (16:13). God sees! Not only does God see, but even better, God sees *me*, and in spite of my confusion and rebellion, He lets me get a glimpse of Him!

Scholars disagree about how to interpret the Hebrew of the last sentence of verse 13. It literally reads, "I have seen here after the One who saw me." The expression is almost identical to Exodus 33:23, where God tells Moses that he will see His back, but not His face, for no one can see His face and live. So the meaning may be, "I have caught a glimpse of God." But since there is the motif in the Old Testament that no one can see God and live, because His glory and holiness are too awesome, some understand Hagar to be marveling that she has actually seen God and is still alive. (The NASB takes this interpretation.) The well was called "Beer-la-hai-roi," which means either, "the well of the Living One who sees me," or, as the scholarly C. F. Keil argues, "the well of the seeing alive," since Hagar saw God and remained alive. The idea is, Hagar saw the God who saw her need and was merciful to her in spite of her sin. In our trials, ...

A. We see God who is merciful in spite of our sin.

When God meets you in a time of trial, as He did with Hagar, and you see Him, your first thought is, "Oh, God, how can You be so merciful to me, a sinner? I'm in this mess because of my own rebellion and sin, and yet You didn't strike me down or let me go. You directed me in the way I need to go and promised me Your blessing if I will do it. Thank You, Lord!" You gain a fresh glimpse of the mercy of God.

When that happens, it becomes a source of testimony to others. They named the well with this unusual name, Beer-la-hai-roi: "The well of the Living One who sees me," or, "the well of the seeing alive." When travelers asked, "How did this place ever get this name?" the story would be told again, how God met Hagar there in her time of need, told her what to do and promised His blessing. In the same way, when God has met you in your trial and you've seen Him in a fresh way, use it to tell others of His great mercy.

B. God's mercy moves us to submit to Him.

"The kindness of God leads you to repentance" (Rom. 2:4). Hagar submitted to God by returning to Abram and Sarai. Submission is the proper response when we see God and His mercy toward us in Christ. The text says that Abram (not Hagar) called the name of his son Ishmael. That means that Hagar told Abram of her meeting with God and of God's command to name the boy "God hears." That was a gentle rebuke to Abram, who had taken Hagar as his wife because he was beginning to wonder if God did, in fact, hear. He was trying to help God out.

But in our affliction, when it seems that God has forgotten us and that He isn't hearing our prayers, we need to learn to submit to Him, not resort to our human schemes. We need to go back and put ourselves under the authority structures God has ordained for our benefit. If you're a teenager, you need to submit to your parents. If you're married, you need to commit yourself to your partner, in spite of the difficulties. If you're hopping from church to church, disgruntled with each one because of the impossible people who have wronged you, you need to commit yourself to a church where Christ is honored and His Word is preached. Stick it out and work through the problems in a spirit of submission to the leadership God has placed in that church, even though they aren't perfect. As one wag said, "If you ever find a perfect church, don't join it. You'll spoil it!"

Conclusion

Dr. James Dobson tells of a time when he watched his daughter's pet hamster trying to gnaw its way out of its cage to what, no doubt, looked to the hamster like freedom. But Dobson saw what the hamster did not: the family's pet dog, watching expectantly from a few feet away. If the hamster had worked its way free, it would have met sudden death. The cage was really its protection and blessing.

We're often like that pet hamster. We try to break free from some confinement or trial that God has put us in, thinking that then we could really live. But God sees that our real need is to submit to Him in the trial. We need to realize that even as God saw Hagar, He sees us. He especially sees our affliction. If in our trials

we will look, like Hagar, we will see God in His mercy toward us. Our response will be to submit ourselves to His loving purpose. The French writer, Paul Claudel, wrote, "Christ did not come to do away with suffering; He did not come to explain it; He came to fill it with His presence." I pray that if you're suffering, you'll see the God who sees you.

Discussion Questions

1. Is every trial from God or can trials come from Satan? Does it make any difference with regard to our response?
2. Is it always God's will for a Christian in a difficult trial to submit? Does submission mean not seeking a way out? When can we rightly seek a way out (e.g., of a difficult job)?
3. Is it ever right for Christians to stand up for their rights, to rebel against their government, or to fight for the abolition of unjust social institutions, such as slavery? When? How?
4. Is God endorsing slavery by making Hagar go back and submit to Sarai? Was God being unfair to her?

Copyright 1996, Steven J. Cole, All Rights Reserved.