

Hagar the Handmaiden

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One of the difficulties exploring Biblical characters is that they are so messy. In the cartoon world, the good guys are dressed in white and the bad guys in black. There is no mistaking the goodness from the evil. The real world has never been so clean and neither has Scripture. Each person we meet on those sacred pages is a complex mix of occasional holy brilliance with liberal doses of frail humanity. The chapters in Genesis that will be studied together illustrate this reality in the characters we will meet there. There will be no temptation to hold up those we meet as perfect models of trust, faithfulness, patience, love or any other such virtue. The only hero in this story is God and ultimately, that is true of every story, especially yours and mine.

This study is focused particularly on Hagar although her story is so intertwined with Sarai and Abram, that we can't help but look at all three of these individuals and the parts that they play. The challenge for each of us will be to allow the characters to be both sinner and saint. There is no good girl or bad girl, blessed or cursed. God does amazing things in all three lives, in spite of their glaring faults. In the words of Walter Brueggemann, *"The story of their lives is the story of hopeful but impatient groaning as they wait for the redemption of their bodies and of their history"*. (page 151) His commentary on Genesis from the Interpretation Series is the primary resource for this study. (Copyright: John Knox Press 1982)

We are all messy – we get things right and God uses us in ways we can't have ever imagined. We also get things horribly, horribly wrong but even then, God does not abandon us. He grants us his blessings and promises his presence as we walk through the consequences of the best of our choices and the worst of our choices. Whatever we might ask or pray for or desire, ultimately, all we truly ever need is to be embraced in the loving arms of our God.

Read Genesis 15: 4 – 6

1. What exactly is God's promise to Abram? Is Sarai mentioned as part of the fulfillment of the promise? What exactly is it that Abram believed that becomes a credit of faith?

Now Read Genesis 16

The theme of this chapter is "Can God be trusted?" The promise has been given but it has not been fulfilled. Time appears to be running out by any reasonable human clock.

2. What might be the reasons Sarai decided to take charge of the promise of God in order to see it fulfilled?
3. Why did Abram let Sarai take charge of the fulfillment of the promise? What strengths of character are revealed in their actions? What weaknesses?

“Faith is not easy. It calls for a persistence which is against common sense. It calls for believing in a gift from God which none of the present data can substantiate. (Brueggemann, pg 152)

4. If willing, share any personal examples where your faith has had to persevere when the facts stood against it.
5. Hagar was a slave from Egypt. She did not even have the status of a concubine. She had no choice in this situation but to be obedient to the demands of her masters. “When she knew she was pregnant, she began to despise her mistress.” (vs 4 NIV) Discuss together all the possible feelings that Hagar might have gone through as this situation evolved.
6. In verse 5, what is going on in Sarai that she now puts the blame on Abram? What is she really angry about? Does Abram deserve any of her anger?
7. How do you feel about Abram’s response? Where does he place the responsibility? Why did he act so passively toward this situation when it was so pivotal to his entire future?
8. Have you ever been sorry to get what you asked for? Sarai received what she had asked for, but it did not fulfill the desire of her heart. What are some ways that we circumvent God’s fulfillment by seeking temporal solutions to the desires of our own hearts?

QUOTE: Rev. Samuel Jackson of Old Presbyterian Church, June 2003:

“The trouble is, where does this leave Hagar? It leaves Hagar on the outside and on the downside. It leaves Hagar as a person without a voice. She is that person throughout human history who simply does not have the power to do what she needs to do. She is sent away. Consider all of those people who had been enslaved, all of those people who have been pressed down, whose limits had been truncated, whose minds feel closed and small because something from the outside has cut them off and made them less than they should be; - people who are on the fringes theologically who feel as though they are being shunted and pushed away and devalued as human beings. This is Hagar. This is Hagar who sits outside the dominant paradigm as it were.

Persons who are legitimately cut off, cut down, and oppressed are unwilling or do not have the fortitude to do whatever it is they can do to gather hope together to march on. The Bible is full of stories of God enabling the victims as they take some responsibility for their own lives”

The beauty of this story is the appearance of the “Angel of the Lord” to Hagar. Hagar is a slave. Hagar is an outsider. The God of Abram is a stranger to Hagar – not one of the god’s of Egypt that she had known. **And yet it is Hagar who receives the first face to face visitation of God (theophany) recorded in the Old Testament since the garden. The angel speaks four times to Hagar.**

9. What does this teach us about God?
10. What instructions does God give to Hagar? (vs. 8 – 9) Note how he addresses Hagar by reminding her of her status. What does Hagar need to change in her life, even though she has been a victim of unwanted circumstances?
11. What is the promise contained in those instructions? The comments God made about Ishmael do not sound very flattering. Discuss whether this is a curse from God or just a statement of consequential reality – that there would be inevitable sibling rivalry that would lead to conflict – a conflict that continues to this very day.
12. Read Genesis 17: 19 – 22. What is the difference between the promise regarding Isaac and the promise regarding Ishmael? What was God’s desire for the two nations?

God reaches out to Hagar in grace and does not abandon her to the mess into which she has been thrust. God moves toward her first. Isn’t this the message of the pure gospel? God always makes the first move – that is the definition of “grace”. God loves the outsiders and is always at work to bring them into the sheep fold. (John 10:16)

13. Hagar gives God a name. What does that name mean to her in her situation? What might it mean to you in your situation?
14. If you could give God a name according to how you have experienced him in your life, what name would you give him?

Read Genesis 21: 8 – 21

15. What issues still continue to trouble Sarah? Is there any change in how Abraham handles Sarah than the first time we read about? Any thoughts about why God continues to allow Sarah to call the shots regarding Hagar and Ishmael?
16. Whose cries did God respond to? Note that Ishmael’s name means, “God hears”!
17. How did God meet Hagar where she was and minister to her?

Conclusion: This is a quote from a sermon by Linda W. McFadden Pullen Memorial Baptist Church, June 20, 1999

"When Isaac was born, Sarah couldn't bear the thought that her child would have to share the inheritance with the slave girl's son. Suddenly Hagar and Ishmael were an embarrassment, an irritation. So Sarah told Abraham to get rid of them. These two people whom Sarah had used to salvage God's plan had become expendable.

But God is so stubborn about loving us humans and so determined to stick with us even when we mess up that God told Abraham not to worry about it! God said that the blessing was good for both sons, so Ishmael, too, would be the father of a nation. Even so, it must have been with a heavy heart that Abraham sent Hagar and Ishmael out into the wilderness with only a little food and a skin of water.

So Hagar and Ishmael walked and walked until the water ran out. Where could they go? Hagar was a young woman in a patriarchal culture, a foreigner without kinfolk, without resources, without hope. Given these prospects, Hagar did an entirely understandable thing: she gave up. When the water ran out, Hagar put Ishmael down on the ground and went off a ways and sat down so she wouldn't have to hear her child's suffering. The story says that God hears Ishmael crying. That's a Hebrew pun because Ishmael's name means "God hears."

First, she receives hope; she is told that her child will not perish there in the desert but will live to become the father of a great nation. And secondly, she gets just what she needs to sustain her child then and there--a well of water. This is a story about despair transformed to hope. In a hopeless situation, Hagar got what she needed to nurture her child.

Evelyn Underhill writes, "No Christian escapes a taste of the wilderness on the way to the Promised Land." (Fruits of the Spirit, Morehouse Publishing, 1989.) Most of us do know in our hearts what it is to be lost with an empty canteen and no help in sight. And for most of us, there also comes a time when, like Hagar, we're ready to give up. As a single parent who never expected to be one, a woman whose life had taken her places she wasn't prepared to go, this story told me that Hagar made it. God responded to Hagar, and she had brought Ishmael through. So it gave me hope that I just might be able to bring my child through the wilderness, too."

Hagar found her well only after she had taken Ishmael by the hand and journeyed into the wilderness. And I think that's how it is with us, too. Finding the well requires our faithfulness to our responsibilities.

Not long after the Hagar and Ishmael incident, the tribes of Israel would find themselves in the wilderness. In an interesting twist of historical irony, Hagar's descendants, the Egyptians, will hold the children of Israel as slaves and when they escape they will wander in the wilderness just like Hagar and Ishmael. And just like Hagar and Ishmael they, too, will feel that they have been abandoned, forgotten by God and left to die of hunger and thirst. And like Hagar and Ishmael they will discover in the wilderness that God remembers them. God is with them, God's presence will save them."

18. What promise do you need to claim today as a result of this study?