

Genesis 16

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[0 : 00] Now, this evening, as has already been mentioned, we're going to be participating in the Lord's Supper, and we'll remember and celebrate that we are loved by God.

And to prepare for that remembrance, I want us to meet a woman who was loved by God, and her name is Hagar, and we will discover something of Hagar's tragic life and of God's tender love, and how the two wonderfully meet.

And as you listen to the story, a story of God's love, I want you to discover anew something of how God loves and of how we are to love.

The love of God, as I've mentioned in prayer already, is a love to know, but it's also a love to show. And as we think about Hagar and of God's love for Hagar, I want us to reflect on it in these two ways, to reflect on the love of God that we can know, the love that is demonstrated in how God deals with Hagar, but also that we would take the challenge of showing that same love to others, to men and women like Hagar, in perhaps very different circumstances, but who at core are very similar in terms of their needs.

So that's the way in which we want to consider the account this evening, when we've been mentioning about love being something to know and to show. You know, we're reminded of what Jesus said to His disciples, as I have loved you, you are to love one another.

[1 : 54] There we have it, to know God's love and to show God's love. Now the stage for this love drama is the desert. And really it's a drama in two acts, or two desert encounters.

But this evening we will focus our attention on just one, the first of these encounters recorded in the 16th chapter of Genesis that we read.

Those of you who are familiar with the story will remember that there was a second desert encounter between Hagar and the Lord.

We read of that in chapter 21. But this evening we're just going to focus on this first encounter that is recorded there in the chapter just read.

Now as we follow the drama, we can shadow Hagar as a woman who is in turn starved of love, showered by love, and surprised by love.

[2 : 59] That's the manner in which we want to consider this account, or Hagar's experience of God's love, or of love even more generally.

So first of all, we are going to see her as a woman starved of love, then showered by love, and also very tenderly the woman surprised by God's love.

So first of all, Hagar as a woman starved of love. Hagar is a woman who knows little of love and much of grief and misery.

Let's just consider something of her life and circumstances as we know them, as the Bible account gives us a significant amount of information about her.

We can see just how miserable in many ways her life had been or was. What do we know about her? Well, first of all, we know that she was an outsider.

[3 : 57] In Abraham's household, she was very much an outsider. And there in verse 1, we're told that Nelsemai, Abraham's wife, had borne him no children, but she had an Egyptian slave named Hagar.

So even in terms of her nationality, she was an outsider. Presumably, she became part of the household. Back in chapter 12, we read of Abraham in Egypt, and you know, recall the events there where Abraham lied about Sarah.

But leaving that aside, presumably it was during that time in Egypt. We presume, we don't know, but we presume that it was during that time that Hagar became part of the household, but as a slave.

She's an outsider who has been brought in. And even just thinking of her as an outsider is maybe a reality about her that helps us to bring this into our present day as we try and reflect on who are the outsiders in our country, in our community, in our city, who are the outsiders that we have the opportunity to meet and to relate with and to help and to show love to.

Well, Hagar was an outsider, but she was also, and we've read it in that same sentence, she was a slave. We're told that Sarah had an Egyptian slave, but she had an Egyptian slave.

[5 : 35] And even the language that is employed there has the sense of owned. And of course, that is the reality. She was a slave. She was owned by Sarah.

Hagar is not viewed by her mistress as a person, but as a possession. Not principally as a person, but as a possession property to be used and abused at the whim of her owner.

And of course, the story gives evidence of that. That is exactly what Hagar experienced. She was used and abused at the whim of her owner.

She was a slave. Now, when we think of our own circumstances, our own country, our own city, we may imagine that, well, slavery is a thing of the past. But we know that's not true.

We know there are still many slaves and probably not so far from this building as we might imagine. But even those who aren't formally, in the sense, slaves, not owned by somebody else.

[6 : 36] How many people around us are in many real ways in that condition of slavery, being abused by others more powerful than them?

Well, this is Hagar, an outsider, a slave. In some ways, we could consider her as somebody who is nameless. Now, obviously, she does have a name. She's called Hagar. But it's not a name that seems to be employed much.

In the account, we never find Sarah or Abraham naming her by name. She's always referred to simply as the slave or my slave or your slave.

She is within the household, one seemingly not worthy of being addressed by name. And what she is as a slave and what she proves to be is also a means to an end.

Notice what happens. And we know the account, Sarah trying to find a way around this failure to have a son, sees Hagar as the way out, as her solution.

[7 : 49] And so what does she do? Well, she gives this instruction to her husband. Go sleep with my slave. Perhaps I can build a family through her. What is Hagar?

She's a means to an end. That's all she is. She's a womb, not even for hire, but available to be used in order to secure the purposes of Sarah.

Sarah has no interest in how Hagar would feel about this arrangement, what her thoughts would be on the matter. No, she is there to be used. She is a means to the end that those who possess her and own her and control her can determine.

As the story develops, we also discover her to be, or certainly she's deemed to be, or considered as a problem. We know what happens. She is.

She conceives. She's pregnant. And we know that the consequences of that, how as a result of that, she begins to look down on her mistress. I can't help but have some sympathy for her, given the treatment that it would seem she had been receiving, that this would be a source of vindication almost, that she was now pregnant, and that somehow that granted her more favor in the eyes, certainly, of Abraham.

[9 : 10] But that, of course, produces the outcome that she has now become a problem in the household. She's a problem in the marriage.

We read in verse 5, So there's this great marital crisis.

And what's the cause of the crisis? Who is the cause of the crisis? It's this problem slave, Hagar.

And in all of this, in all of these different ways, and bringing them all together, we can certainly see her and consider her as a sorry victim in everything that's been said, but then very particularly in another very specific way.

What happens? What is the outcome of this? When Sarai is resentful of this turn of events that she herself had engineered, what do we read in verse 6? This Abraham, in response to his wife's complaints, responds, Your slave is in your hands.

Seemingly very little concern to protect her. Your slave is in your hands. Do with her whatever you think best. And then we read, Then Sarai ill-treated Hagar, so she fled from her.

[10 : 33] She's ill-treated. Whether this was verbal abuse, whether it was physical abuse, we're not told. However, I think we can reasonably conclude that it must have been severe, certainly severe

enough for this pregnant woman to flee into the desert.

Just think along those lines. We're not told the nature of the ill-treatment. But here is a woman who, though starved of love, is at least provided for materially in Abraham's household.

He was a wealthy man. She lacked nothing in terms of material goods. She's pregnant. She's expecting a child. And yet she flees into the desert. Now, what would drive somebody to do that if it's not severe ill-treatment?

I think from what she does, I think you can reasonably conclude that Sarai was treating her very badly indeed. And so we have this woman, an outsider, a slave, treated as property, means to an end, a victim of the ill-treatment of others.

I wonder, can you try and imagine how Hagar must have felt as she stumbled through the wilderness, as she flees from her master and her mistress's household, into the wilderness, into the desert, pregnant, exhausted, alone, traumatized.

[12:01] How must this poor woman have felt? Was this fleeing to the desert, was it a desperate flight to freedom? We're told in the passage that she was on the road to Shur.

Then in verse 7, the angel of the Lord met her, and he found her next to the spring that is beside the road to Shur. Now, that geographic reference is an interesting one because the road to Shur gives us an indication that she was heading towards Egypt.

Now, of course, she was from Egypt. And so, again, we can reasonably conclude that she maybe wondered, well, is there perhaps a way for me to get home? And that will be my freedom, this desperate flight to freedom.

Well, if that had been her intention, and we don't know that for sure, she really had no chance.

There was no way she was going to make it to Egypt. She was lost, she was hopeless, and she was helpless.

Now, this was not a flight to freedom, but a leap into the abyss of death for her and for her child in her womb. Now, as we try and bring this to our day, there are many, many Hagar's in our broken world, many Hagar's in Aberdeen, perhaps closer to you than you imagine, lost, hopeless, and helpless, starved of love.

[13:24] And who will show them love? But this, thank God, is not the end of the story, because Hagar is not only a woman starved of love, she is also a woman showered by love.

God's love is manifested or revealed or experienced by means of an encounter in the desert. And is that not often the way? Not always, but is it not often the way that meaningful, deep encounters with God occur in the desert?

Not in the Green Valley, not when all is well, but when things are tough, when things are rough, when things are difficult, when we're in crisis, that is when God so often makes Himself known to us in a powerful and in an intimate way, perhaps more so than in other circumstances.

Now, that's not always so, but certainly it was so for Hagar. But who is it that comes to Hagar in the desert? In verse 7, we're told, or the one who comes to meet her is identified.

And the one who meets her is identified as the angel of the Lord. There in verse 7, the angel of the Lord found Hagar. Now, this is the first appearance of this mysterious figure in the Bible.

[14:41] And the angel of the Lord will reappear on subsequent occasions, but this is the first occasion, and that in itself gives it some significance. Who is he? Who is the angel of the Lord?

Well, in this passage alone, even if we limited ourselves to this passage, we see that he speaks as if he is God.

There in verse 10, the angel added, I will increase your descendants so much that they will be too numerous to count. Now, only God can make that promise. Only God can give to Hagar this assurance that this will be what will happen.

And equally, in verse 11, in the promises that are made, the one who speaks speaks as if he were God.

But then in verse 13, the one who speaks is identified with God and recognized as God by Hagar. We read in verse 13, And she gave this name to the Lord who spoke to her.

And, well, who spoke to her? Well, the angel of the Lord spoke to her. And yet, Hagar says, She gave this name to the Lord who spoke to her. You are the God who sees me. For she said, I have now seen the one who sees me.

[15:51] So, what are we to conclude? Well, the angel of the Lord is, in some way, some mysterious way, a manifestation of the Lord himself.

He is God in human form. Now, over the years, there have been numerous attempts to identify the angel of the Lord with perhaps greater precision.

A popular identification is with the second person of the Trinity, with Jesus. I'm not sure if we're able to make that identification with complete confidence.

I think we can, with confidence, identify this mysterious figure as a manifestation of God in some way. And I think that is as far as we can go. But I think it's as far as we need to go.

God meets with Hagar. The angel of the Lord comes to her encounter. And remember that this is the first time God has revealed himself in this manner.

[16:50] And to whom is conferred this privilege? To the slave girl, to the foreigner, to the nobody, to the despised one. Now, that alone is surely hugely significant.

When God, for the very first time, reveals himself in this manner, he does so to Hagar. Not to Abraham, not to one of the patriarchs, not to some worthy of the faith, but to Hagar, to the foreigner, the despised one, the nobody.

It is to such that God makes himself known in this gracious manner. But we have described Hagar as showered by love. And in what different concrete ways does God love Hagar?

Now, remember that our concern is to know God's love and to show God's love. Well, let's just, as we go through the account, notice a number of ways in which God shows his love to Hagar.

I think the first thing that we can say is that God heard Hagar. We need to kind of jump ahead in the passage through to verse 11, simply so that we can follow chronologically what God does, or the manner in which God loves Hagar.

[17:56] And the first thing he does is to hear her. In verse 11, when the angel is speaking to her, he makes reference to that. He says, you are now pregnant and you will give birth to a son.

You shall name him Ishmael, for the Lord has heard of your misery. God heard Hagar. What did God hear?

Did he hear, perhaps, Hagar crying for help? We don't know. We're not told that she did so. And maybe we need to conclude that she didn't cry out to God for help.

We certainly don't know and we're certainly not told. What then did God hear? Well, he heard her misery. Now, the manner in which is translated here in the version of the Bible that we're reading from is, for the Lord has heard of your misery.

But I think what captures more vividly the situation is simply this, that the Lord has heard your misery. He's heard your misery. Even though you didn't cry out, even though you didn't ask for help, he heard your misery.

[19:02] And I don't think only now in the desert. I don't think that God heard the misery of Hagar for the first time when she's stumbling through the wilderness. No, he heard her misery when she was made bereft of her family in Egypt, when she was brought into this household of strangers, when she was ill-treated by her mistress, when she was abused in all manner of ways.

He heard her misery day after day, even though she was unaware that there was a God who was hearing her misery. God hears your misery.

God hears our misery. But again, when we think of our responsibility or our privilege of knowing God's love, of being heard by God, we also need to show God's love.

And in this regard, we need to be the ones who hear the misery and the affliction and the torment of others. And as we hear, sympathize and respond and help.

God heard Hagar. Of course, the verb heard that's employed here is pregnant with meaning and significance, which is particularly appropriate in the circumstances.

[20:16] When the Bible tells us that God hears, it's telling us that He is attentive to, that He knows of, that He's sympathetic to, that He's moved by that which He hears.

And we could go on. And of course, this looks like somebody we know, somebody who hears and is moved by the affliction of others. Who does this look like? Who does this point forward to?

Well, it looks, of course, like Jesus, as the one who saw the crowds. And He was moved with compassion because they were like sheep without a shepherd. Not just the crowds, but individual men and women in miserable circumstances, in agony, in affliction of one kind or another.

He saw, He heard, and He was moved. So God heard Hagar. But also, we're told that God found Hagar. Back to verse 7, the angel of the Lord found Hagar near a spring in the desert.

God takes the initiative. This is God's search for a despised slave. And does this not also point forward to God's great search and rescue operation, the Son of Man who came to seek and to save

that which was lost?

[21 : 31] Hagar doesn't find God. God finds Hagar. But we need to move on. God shows His love to Hagar. Also, by speaking to her, God spoke to Hagar.

In verse 8, we read, And He said, Hagar, slave of Sidon, where have you come from? And where are you going? He spoke to her. And He still speaks today.

And how does He speak today? Well, He speaks through His Word, but He also speaks through His people as we speak and communicate God's love to others.

We are His angels, His messengers. God spoke to Abraham, and very much part of that, God called her by name.

We've already commented how Abraham and Sarah are never recorded as addressing her by name. Not so God. Again, think about this. What is the very first word pronounced by the angel of the Lord?

[22 : 31] We've already stressed that this is a significant moment in redemptive history. God appealing for the very first time as the angel of the Lord. And what is the very first word pronounced by the angel of the Lord?

Hagar. The very first word. Hagar. The name of this poor woman. The very first word. Hagar. He calls her by name.

He is concerned for Hagar. Notice the question that he poses. Where have you come from and where are you going? That's a big question. That's a huge question that we would do well to ask ourselves and perhaps ask others to enter into meaningful conversations.

Where have you come from and where are you going? How would you answer that question? This isn't the time to give further thought to that. But what it does reveal is his concern for this woman. He counsels Hagar. Then in verse 9, then the angel of the Lord told her, go back to your mistress and submit to her. Maybe not what she wanted to hear, but this is the wise counsel that she has given.

[23 : 34] And then, of course, God promises Hagar, makes great promises to her as an expression of his love. Not just the promise to rescue her from her plight, but much more than that.

She is to give birth to a son and her descendants will be too numerous to count. And the son's name is to be Ishmael, which means God hears.

A permanent and tender reminder that her God hears. I would imagine that throughout Hagar's life, so often when maybe she began to doubt, the very name of her son was a permanent reminder of the God who hears.

Ishmael, God hears. Do you know this love? Do you show this love? But finally and more briefly, we can think about Hagar as a woman surprised by love.

And let's just spend a moment considering Hagar's response to God's love. In verse 13 we read, she gave this name to the Lord who spoke to her. You are the God who sees me.

[24 : 36] For she said, I have now seen the one who sees me. Thinking, first of all, with that second statement, I have now seen the one who sees me. The translation that we have here doesn't fully capture Hagar's sense of wonder and amazement.

Just listen to another way in which that expression is translated into English. That second expression, I have now seen the one who sees me. Another way of translating it that I think better captures that amazement of Hagar is truly I have now seen.

In the Hebrew original, there is this sense of wonder and amazement captured by those words.

Truly I have now seen the one who sees me. The picture that's being painted here is of a woman who is lost in wonder and astonishment and amazement and surprised.

And the question is, what is it that astonishes her? Why is she so astonished? And it is simply this, that she is able to declare, He sees me.

This is what astonishes her. He sees me. The God of the universe, He sees me. She hadn't imagined, she couldn't conceive that a woman like her would be seen by God.

[25 : 53] It was inconceivable to her who was viewed by others as a piece of property, abused and ill-treated, and yet she discovers that this God sees her.

He sees me. He cares for me. He loves me. But also, this is the other side that is remarkable. I see Him.

I see Him. You're the God who sees me. I have now seen the one who sees me. God sees her, and she sees God.

God. And again, we pose the question, how will men and women like Hagar see God today in Aberdeen where we live?

How does Hagar respond in the midst of her wonder and astonishment? How does she respond? Well, she does something very bold. Indeed, she's the first woman in the Bible recorded to do this. [26 : 48] She gives God a name. She names God. You are the God who sees me. She gave this name to the Lord who spoke to her. You are the God who sees me.

And in giving Him this name, this is really an act of worship. She worships God. She obeys God. In verse 15, we're told how she had been given this counsel. Go back.

Go back to your household. Submit to your mistress. And what do we read in verse 15? So Hagar bore Abraham a son, and Abraham gave the name Ishmael to the son she had born. And of course, implicit in that is that following this encounter, she did exactly what she had been told to do.

She obeyed God's instruction to go back and to submit to her mistress, who perhaps continued to ill-treat her for all we know. We certainly know that on the next occasion when we meet with her, she is again suffering at the hands of Sarah.

So this is a woman loved by God. And God still loves the despised and the abused and the lost and the lonely and the hopeless and the helpless.

[27 : 56] And it is this love for such that we celebrate at the Lord's Supper, for that is who we are, lost and helpless and hopeless without Him.

May we know this love ever more deeply, but also may we show this love ever more generously.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank You for Your Word.

We thank You that You are indeed the God who sees. We thank You that with Hagar we can testify You are the God who sees me. You are the God who cares for me.

You are the God who loves me. And as we rejoice in that reality, as we perhaps share in some of the wonder of Hagar such generous love, we pray that not only would we know it, not only would we experience it, but that we would also be those who show it to others.

And we pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.