

# BELPRES CHURCH

## Sermon Title: God Who Sees Me

Pastor Scott Dudley

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**Scripture:** Genesis 16:7-10, 13

<sup>7</sup> The angel of the LORD found Hagar near a spring in the desert; it was the spring that is beside the road to Shur. <sup>8</sup> And he said, "Hagar, slave of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going?"

"I'm running away from my mistress Sarai," she answered.

<sup>9</sup> Then the angel of the LORD told her, "Go back to your mistress and submit to her." <sup>10</sup> The angel added, "I will increase your descendants so much that they will be too numerous to count."

<sup>13</sup> 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<sup>[a]</sup> the One who sees me."

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### Transcript:

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Well, hello BelPres. My name is Scott, I'm the Senior Pastor here. I will be preaching from Genesis chapter 16, if you have a Bible nearby or you can follow along on the screen. Jesus, I ask that You would teach us, speak to us through Your Word. You are the God who sees us. Lord, help us know what that means deeper. We pray this in Your name, Jesus. Amen. Well, one of my flaws is that when I'm looking for something, I can be looking right at it and not see it. This happens to me all the time. I'll be looking for something like my cellphone and I'll say, "Where is it?" And my wife will say, "It's right there in front of you." And I'll be like, "How did that get there?" My son seems to have inherited this from me. One day, he was looking in the refrigerator for the ketchup and he said, "Where's the ketchup?" And my wife said, "It's right there behind the milk." And he said, "Oh, behind. Behind is my downfall." I wonder if you ever feel that way? Like people don't see you.

Do you feel sometimes unseen, hidden behind the milk and no one's paying attention? Feel ignored or insignificant? Or maybe you feel misunderstood, like people see you but they don't really understand you. Maybe that's a family member, or a boss, or a spouse, or a friend. They just don't get you and you don't feel seen, you don't feel heard. Do you sometimes feel like God doesn't see you? Maybe you're going through a really hard time and you're like, "God, do You see? Do You see what's going on here? Do You see what's happening? Do You care, God?" And what about the people around you? Do you think they feel seen? Do you think they feel heard by you? By God? We're doing a sermon series on the names of God in the Bible, and each different name for God in the Bible tells us something about His character. About who He is, and what He cares about, and what He does. The more we understand about God's character, the more courage, hope, and joy we have.

Today, I'm going to be looking at a passage of Scripture, Genesis 16, where a woman named Hagar names God as, "The God who sees me." In the original Hebrew, the phrase is El Roi, God who sees me. When you feel unseen, when you feel like nobody understands you, God sees you. God hears you. God knows you by name. I think we all need to feel seen and heard. For you, what makes you feel seen? What makes you feel heard? For some people, it's as simple as someone looking at them and saying, "You have a hard job.", "Thank you. Thank you. You noticed, thank you." Maybe for others, it's when someone notices something that you did well. Or maybe when someone listens to you and asks you questions, doesn't just listen to you for a little bit and then say, "Well, I'll pray for you." Which is often Christianese for, "I'm done with this conversation, so shut up." But no, really listens to you, asks questions, really does pray for you. What makes you feel seen and what makes you feel heard? Because I think a lot of people do not feel seen in our culture.

I think young people sometimes don't feel seen. I think senior citizens often don't feel seen. People of color don't feel seen sometimes. But the God revealed in the Bible who comes to us in the Person of Jesus is the God who sees you, the God who sees me. I'm going to look at this story in Genesis chapter 16, just walk through it one section at a time, and I'll make some comments along the way of practical application points. This is a disturbing story, but in the end, it ends with hope and freedom and transformation. And just preliminary comment before I get to that, when reading Scripture, it is helpful to remember that there are three kinds of passages in the Bible. Some are prescriptive, that means they're telling us what to do. Other passages are just descriptive, they're not telling us what to do, they just describe what happens. They're not making any value judgment. And then other passages are restrictive, they tell us what not to do. Prescriptive, descriptive restrictive. The chapter we're going to look at right now would fall in the restrictive category, don't do this.

Another title for this chapter could be, Stupid People Doing Stupid Things. The background is that God has promised a man named Abram, whose name He later changes to Abraham, that his descendants will become the nation of Israel, whose job it will be to carry the good news of God all around the world. The problem is Abram and his wife, Sarai ... who God later renames Sarah, they don't have any kids and they are past the age of childbearing, so they decide to help God out. Hurry the promised child along, Give God an assist. How do you think that turns out for them? Not good. Genesis 16:1, "Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. But she had an Egyptian slave named Hagar, so she said to Abram, 'Go, sleep with my servant, because I can build a family through her. Go get her pregnant, Abram, and I'll just

call that my kid.'" Seriously? What made them think this was a good plan? Now, it's true, that in that culture back then, sometimes when women couldn't have a child, they'd find a surrogate mother.

But just because something is a cultural norm doesn't mean that you should do it. Just because everybody else is doing it, doesn't make it right, it just makes it popular. This is unjust. Hagar is a slave, she has no say in this. And then it says, "Abram agreed to what Sarai said." So he's just passive. "Sure, dear. Sounds good to me." And then it says, "Sarai took her Egyptian slave, Hagar, and gave her to her husband to be his wife." Not concubine, wife. So Hagar now becomes Abram's second wife, which raises her status. She's disempowered, but it raises her status a little bit. So Hagar gets pregnant, and then it says, "When she knew she was pregnant, she began to despise her mistress." In the original Hebrew, the literal translation would be her mistress became smaller in her eyes. Because you see, back then the only way a woman was thought to have worth or value was if she had kids ... which is primitive. We would see it as primitive, which it is. Motherhood is wonderful, but there's a lot other things women can do.

But I also need to say that every culture ... We can look at that culture and say it's primitive. But every culture has its list of things that unless you have those things, you're considered nothing. You're considered barren. Unless you have certain grades, or a certain job, or a certain amount of money, then you're a nothing. In that culture for women, it was to have kids and Sarah didn't have any. So, she's a slave herself to trying to fulfill her cultural expectations. But Hagar is now Abram's second wife who is pregnant, which makes Sarai jealous. Who could have seen that coming, right? It's so obvious this is what was going to happen. "Then Sarai said to Abram, 'You are responsible for the wrong I am suffering.'" What? Whose idea was this? "I put my servant in your arms, and now that she knows she is pregnant, she despises me." So now everything is a mess because they decided to help God out. Have you ever done that? "I got it, God. I'll take it from here. I'll do it my way. Thanks for the input."

Have you ever tried to rush a promise? Or maybe pressure someone into dating you or marrying you? Forced a promotion before it's time? When we do things our way not God's way, we make a mess of things. One of Dr King's great insights was that in doing the work of justice, you had to do it God's way. Otherwise, you would take on the characteristics of the oppressor. You would start to use power in bullying ways, and would start to be consumed with hate. Dr. King insisted that it's not enough to do good things, you have to do good things God's way. Otherwise, you make a mess of stuff. A while back, we asked our elders to write out what some of our shadow mission statements might be. A shadow mission is something you don't want to do, but fall into when you're not being your best self. One of the shadow missions our elders came up with was, "BelPres, we can do it. God can help." Which I think is an attitude I know I sometimes have, a lot of us have. "I got it, God. I'll do it my way."

A practical take home from this story is where might be trying to do something your way, not God's way? Ask the Holy Spirit to show you that. Because when we do that, we make a mess of things. Then the story goes on. "Abram says to Sarai, 'Your slave is in your hands, do with her whatever you think best.' Then Sarai mistreated Hagar so she fled from her." Abram and Sarai are clearly the oppressors here. Hagar is from a different country, Egypt. So she's a culture outsider, which can feel very, very ... It can make you feel unseen as you just heard in Isabelle's testimony. Hagar is a slave, so she's completely disempowered. And she's a female in a

patriarchal culture. Sarai and Abram have all the power and they use it in sinful ways, and the only hero in this story is Hagar. So Hagar runs away and the text says, "Then the angel of the Lord told her, 'Go back to your mistress and submit to her.'" What? Go back? Did the God just justify slavery?

No, slavery is a sin and we'll see in this story as the story goes on, that's not quite what's happening here. God is the God who liberates. In the very next book of the Bible, Exodus, He gets His people, the Israelites, out of slavery. And He is going to free Hagar, but first He sees her and gives her dignity. The next sentence says, "The angel added, 'I will increase your descendants so much that they will be too numerous to count.'" This is a shocking promise. God is basically saying, "Your descendants are going to become a great nation." Now, in this culture, only men founded great nations. Women did not. Women were never the founders of a nation. But God here makes Hagar, He says that, "Hagar, you're going to be the only female founder of a great nation." God sees her. God sees her for who she really is, beyond her category of slave. When God looks at her, when God sees her, He doesn't see a "slave", He sees a woman strong enough to be the founder of a nation.

"Then angel of the Lord also said to her, 'You are now pregnant, and you will give birth to a son. You shall name him Ishmael.'" The name, Ishmael, means God hears. This is a story all about how God hears and how God's sees us. And then the angel goes on to say, "And he will be a wild donkey of a man." Which I like that verse, it's like, "You're going to have a son, Hagar, and you're going to have your hands full with him. So just word of warning." And his descendants become the Ishmaelites who show up in various places throughout the rest of the Bible. And in fact, modern day Arabs trace their ancestry to Ishmael. And then the text 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.'" This is another stunning moment. She doesn't use a pre-existing for God, she gives God a name. She names Him. She, the outcast slave from a different culture is the only person ever given the privilege of actually naming God.

No wonder she feels seen. No wonder she feels heard. When you feel overlooked, when others don't see you for who you really are or see you only in some kind of a category ... too young, too old, athletic, not athletic, educated, not educated, rich, poor, Black, White, Latino, Asian. When others don't see you for who you really are, God sees you. In all your individuality, you, His unique, unrepeatable, miracle you. And He also sees those things you try to hide, those places you feel shame. Those things you've done or didn't do that you feel guilt over, He sees those too, and He loves you still. You are fully seen and fully loved. And when you really understand that, it cancels shame. Another practical application would be ask God to help you feel seen by Him. Pray, "God, who sees me, help me feel seen by You." Maybe remember some times where you have felt seen by Him. But also know this, whether you feel it or not, He does see you. But not only does He see you, He will act, He will redeem, He will transform, He will set free.

But not always following the script that we would write, not the way that we would write the script. Hagar is set free from her slavery in the end. But first, she bravely does what God says and goes back to Abram and Sarai, a very brave woman. Why does God tell her to return to that difficult situation? A couple of reasons. First, in order to free her. Because see, right now

she's a fugitive slave. So at best, she's going to be perpetually on the run. Or at worst, be caught and killed. That is a dead end, right? But when she goes back later on, Sarah has a child of her own, Isaac. And then once Sarah has her own child, all the old jealousies come back, she tells Abraham, "Send her away." And Abraham reluctantly does it. But that is the same thing as setting her free. See, before, she was a runaway slave. But when Abraham sends her away, that is the same thing as setting her free. He emancipates her. So by going back, she becomes not a fugitive slave anymore, but a slave who has been given her freedom.

God had to send her back so she could be free. Here's a spiritual truth. God sometimes calls us to do very hard things because there's a greater blessing at the end. Dr. King willingly accepted God's call on his life to work for justice and it cost him his life. God will sometimes call us to do very hard things because it leads to a greater blessing. We don't like that, it goes against our consumer Christianity. "What have you done for me lately, Jesus?" But the truth is God sometimes calls us to do hard things because there's a greater blessing at the end. The second reason Hagar has to go back so that Ishmael can be born under Abram's blessing. In the next chapter, God makes a sacred promise called a covenant with Abraham and Sarai ... with Abram and He says, "You two will have a son, and his descendants will become the nation of Israel." And God makes a sacred promise called a covenant.

God gives Abraham a visible sign of this covenant. Like how we wear wedding rings as a visible sign of our vows, God says to Abram, "As a visible symbol of My sacred promise to you ... ready, Abram? Here's the visible symbol, go get circumcised." And you can see Abraham going, "Can we go back to the ring? How about a secret handshake?" But he does it. And significantly also circumcised Ishmael, which says that Ishmael, the son of the slave woman is under God's blessing as well, is a child of the covenant as well. And then finally, a third reason she goes back, it demonstrates the spiritual truth that sometimes God doesn't change our circumstances, but He does meet us in our circumstances. The reason Hagar has courage to go back is because she has been seen by God. She goes back to the same situation but knowing that she's a daughter of God, and that makes all the difference in the world. I've seen this over and over in cancer patients, or people going through divorce, or poverty. You heard it in Isabelle's testimony, that being an immigrant is really hard.

But when you feel seen by God, it gives you courage to keep going. God gives Hagar the strength to endure it, and then God begins to clean up the mess that Abram and Sarai have made. Some of us on staff were talking to about this passage this week and one person said that that old saying, "God helps those who help themselves." That's not in the Bible, but from this text and from our lives, perhaps the saying should be, "God has to help you because you just helped yourself and screwed it up, so God's got to clean it up." Which is what God's starts to do here, starts to clean up the mess Abram and Sarai have made. To summarize the end of Hagar's story, Hagar does return and probably for a while now that she's Abram's second wife and has had his son, probably was treated a little bit better until Sarai had her own son, Isaac. And then all those jealousies came back and she said, "Send Hagar away." And Abraham did that, which is tantamount to setting her free, giving her full freedom.

He gives them some food and some water, and Hagar and Ishmael go out to the desert. Eventually, they run out of water, but God meets them, gives them water, reiterates His promise Hagar that her descendants will become a great nation. And the story ends by saying

Ishmael grew up. And while he was living in the Desert of Paran, his mother got a wife for him from Egypt. I like that verse, what a good mom. "Here. Here's a nice Egypt girl for you to marry. You like her, right? You like her." And the story ends with Hagar out of slavery and her son about to have his own kids who will become a great nation. There's even some healing in Abraham's family. Because a few chapters later when Abraham dies, we get this beautiful verse, his sons, Isaac and Ishmael, buried him. Their parents fought, but in the second generation between Isaac and Ishmael, there's some reconciliation. And later still, Abraham's grandson, Esau, marries Ishmael's daughter.

All because feeling seen by God gave Hagar the courage to go back so that Ishmael would be considered part of the family, not just the son of a slave woman. When you feel unseen, when you feel unheard or stuck in some kind of category ... old, young, boss, employee, God sees past all of those labels to who you really are. And more than that, He doesn't just see, He understands. Because you see, God does what Hagar does in this story. Hagar bravely returned to a place of her suffering where she was oppressed in order to bring healing and reconciliation, just as centuries later, God Himself comes in the Person of Jesus and we oppressed Him. We crucified Him. He doesn't just see, He actually understands what we're going through because He has suffered too. He never leads us into suffering, but He does go before us into it. Which means you are not alone, you are not abandoned, God sees you. For practical application this week, ask yourself where might you be trying to do things your way, not God's way? As I said before.

Second, ask God to help you feel seen by Him. I said those two earlier. And then third, help someone else feel seen. What makes you feel seen? Maybe it's when someone notices you doing a good job at something, or gives you practical help like bring a meal when you're sick. Whatever makes you feel seen, do that for someone this week, a neighbor, a friend, a fellow student, a coworker. It can be as simple as maybe walking by a homeless person. And instead of just walking by as though they don't exist, look them in the eye and say hello as a way of saying, "I see you. I see you." We can't do this for everyone. That would be overwhelming, so we do have to have boundaries. But we can do it for a few people. And then the final practical application for this week, start all of your prayers by saying, "God who sees me." Just every prayer, start, "God who sees me." To remind you the fact that He does. There's a woman in our church who I'll call June, who prior to COVID was having her blood drawn.

The technician was a young woman in her 20s and June noticed ... see? June saw her. June noticed that this young woman had a tattoo of a lily. So June said, "Oh, that's beautiful. Does it have a special significance?" And the technician said, "It covers my shame." And went on to talk about how she'd had this path that she wasn't proud of, but that she'd overcome it. But the tattoos were a reminder of her past. So she said, "I put a lily over the top of this one, but I have another tattoo that I can't afford to have removed. And every time I look at it, it reminds me of the life that I used to live." And June said, "And that's when the Holy spirit took over. I closed my hands around her and I said, 'Honey, that tattoo is not your mark of shame, it is your badge of victory. God has made you new, and I think God might want you to see those tattoos in a different way too.

When you look at them, you can feel pride in what you've accomplished and thank God for how He helped you along the way. They're symbols of a past left behind and a new life

begun. Honey, they're not your shame, they're your badge of honor." I love you. June is awesome. I want to be like June. June said, "I watched as the lights literally came on in her eyes." And then they were both silent for a minute in a kind of holy moment and the technician said, "You've got a good point." Later as June was in the waiting room waiting to see your doctor, the technician came out again, found her again and said, "Thank you. Thank you. That just changed my perspective on everything." June didn't just notice a tattoo, June saw this young woman with God's eyes and was able to make this young woman feel seen by God. Seen in all her past, all her sins, all her failures, all her shame. Fully seen and yet fully loved by God who is making her new.

And in the process, June felt seen by God too. Because the Holy Spirit took over, saw June's potential to make a difference in someone's life in a three-minute conversation, which may June feel seen as well. Where do you feel unseen? This week, start every prayer with, "God who sees me." To remind yourself that He really does. And who in your life might feel unseen? And how can you make them feel seen by God? You are not alone, you are not an orphan, you are not abandoned. God sees you. Hagar's life was transformed because she felt seen by God. This is the God, as pastor Tim Keller says, who sifts the stars with His hands like sand. A God that big, a God that great saw Hagar. And when she felt seen by God, it transformed her entire life. How much more encouraged can we be because we know something Hagar didn't know? That through Jesus, God says to you and God says to me, "Notice you? Notice you? I'll tell you how much you matter to me. I didn't just notice you, I died for you."

You were seen by God through the eyes of love. God who sees me, God who sees us, help us know that's true in a way that changes us in the same way You changed Hagar, in a way that gives us courage and hope. And then Lord, help us see the other people in our lives in a way that makes them feel seen by You as well. We ask this in Your name, Jesus. Amen.

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**Discussion Questions:** Read Genesis 16:1-16, 21:8-21

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**Opening Questions:**

- ICEBREAKER: Are you a traveler or a homebody?
- Introduce yourself to your group. Share your name, area you live in, and why you decided to join an All In group this winter.

**Scripture Reflection Questions** -- Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following:

- What do we learn about God (e.g., traits, personality, what matters, priorities) in this passage and sermon?
- What do we learn about people, and ourselves in particular, this week?

**Sermon Reflection Questions** – Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:

- Who do you like the most in this story? Who do you like the least? Explain.
- What does Hagar teach us about faith and following God?

**Closing Question and Application:**

- Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week?
- Who might you share this with?