

## Prayers

### Opening prayer

Raise us up O Jesus, to walk tall as Your people, according to our calling. Grant us the courage to engage with others in conversation about You, about our Faith and about the Church of God. Make us not ashamed of our heritage, but glad to be servants of the one true God, who has made everything and is the world's Redeemer and Saviour. Thank You, Lord Jesus Christ: AMEN.

### Prayer Suggestions

**Prayer ideas** *(Alternatives that can broaden the experience of prayer)*

*Pray against Satan's use of books and printed material to fill people's minds with violence and sexual deviancy. Pray not for censorship but for wisdom, intelligence and love.*

#### **On-going prayers**

- **Pray about Aid, and Aid agencies.** *Pray for any Aid organisations you support regularly, and if you do not do this, then ask the Lord about whether you should indeed support such an organisation regularly*
- *Give thanks to God for the joy of work and achievement*
- *Pray for schoolteachers and youth workers who are trying hard to help young people who have no guidance at home. Pray that the Church of God will become involved in education*

### Meditation

Tell us, preacher, what God has said;  
Show that you have searched your soul to bring His Word to us.

Don't tell us stories about yourself;  
Inspire us with your testimony of the wondrous work of God.

Don't preach the latest opinions of Scripture;  
Expound the Word, and explain its depth and power to save.

Don't assess the relevance of the Gospel;  
Explain how Christ loves and saves a bruised and hurting world.

Don't invite us to respond to your sermon;  
Offer the love and grace of Jesus, whose heart is open to all.

So, preach a sermon from your heart;  
A word to awaken the saints and quake the very gates of Hell.

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## Bible Study

### Bible passage – Genesis 16: 7-16

<sup>7</sup> Now the angel of the LORD found Hagar by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring by the road to Shur. <sup>8</sup> And he said,

‘Hagar, servant-girl of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?’

She said,

‘I am running away from my mistress Sarai.’

<sup>9</sup> The angel of the LORD said to her,

‘Go back to your mistress, and submit to her treatment.’ <sup>10</sup> He added, ‘I will increase your offspring so much, they will be too many to count.’

<sup>11</sup> Then the angel of the LORD said to her,

‘You are now pregnant and will bear a son. You will name him Ishmael, for the LORD has heeded your heartbreak. <sup>12</sup> He will be a wild ass of a man; his hand will be against everyone, and everyone’s hand against him; and he will live in hostility with all his kin.’

<sup>13</sup> So she gave this name to the LORD who spoke to her,

‘You are “El-roi,”’ by which she meant, ‘This is where I have seen the LORD who “sees” me.’

<sup>14</sup> Therefore the well was called “Beer-lahai-roi”, and it lies between Kadesh and Bered.

<sup>15</sup> Hagar bore Abram a son; and he gave the name Ishmael to the son she bore him. <sup>16</sup> Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore him Ishmael.

## Review

In God’s plans for the salvation of the world, there are no circumstances through which He cannot work. The story we read yesterday is one of human failure on the part of Abram and Sarai, and once done, could not be undone. Although Abram knew full well that God had promised him a son by Sarai, he attempted to achieve God’s intentions by human methods, sleeping with his wife’s maid Hagar to bear a son and heir who would inherit his name and wealth, and also the Covenant of God. In this way, Abram lost sight of the faith with which God had blessed him and the result was that together with Sarai, there was so much tension and chaos (16:6) that the pregnant Hagar fled Abram’s protection. She ran into the desert in the direction of Egypt, her homeland, but had no clear understanding of what she was doing.

Even though the story may not seem the most inspiring, God quickly acted to do what Abram and Sarai could not, which was to set right what had gone wrong. He was in full control, and took responsibility for Hagar and her unborn child at the point of Abram’s failure. Hagar’s child was still a child of Abram, and a child of the ‘promise’, so the Lord found a way to bless Hagar’s child and today’s passage tells us how He went about doing this. God’s met with Hagar in the desert through an angelic messenger, with the purpose of persuading her to return to Abram and Sarai. In so doing He gave words of prophecy about the son she would bear. One of the significant things about this passage is that the whole subject of the relationship of Ishmael to Abraham and the rejection of Hagar is a source of controversy even today, because Ishmael is regarded as the father of Arab nations, and has been adopted as an important figure in Islam.

From a Christian perspective, however, the story is important for a number of other reasons, and the first is that this is the first occasion in the Bible when an angel appears. At the beginning of the story the angel is referred to by the Hebrew word ‘messenger’, and this is one of the two main roles of angels in the Bible (the other one being ‘warrior’ – e.g. see Daniel 10:13f. & Isaiah 37:36). By the end of the passage, Hagar realises that she has been speaking not to an angel, but to God, and even goes as far as naming Him ‘El-Roi’ meaning ‘God who sees’ (v13). This is the first of many Biblical stories in which God appears to people initially as a messenger angel, before revealing Himself more fully (see also the stories of Abraham in Gen 18:2ff; 21:17ff; Judges 6:11 etc). This is also the first story in the Bible in which a woman is the sole focus, and it is interesting that she is granted a direct encounter with God! In addition, this passage is unique in scripture because it is the only Biblical story in which a woman gives God a name.

All these are important features of the story, but they all serve the general theme, which is of God turning around the whole situation to save everyone from disaster. His actions in this story are a typical mixture of challenge and compassion; He comes to Hagar to reassure her (16:8), and then speaks words of challenge to her to return (16:9). Most importantly, He gives Hagar the great hope and assurance that her son would be born safely, the greatest blessing any woman of those times could have (16:10,11). The future for her son was to be a part of God’s plan for the world, something which would be guaranteed by Abram’s acceptance of her back into his home and his naming of her son (16:15).

## Going Deeper

- Towards Egypt
- Guidance by an angel
- The ‘God who sees’

There are a number of issues which we need to explore further in this text; firstly, the three words or prophecies that the angel said to Hagar, which are God's method of turning things around for Hagar and ultimately for Abram and Sarai. Secondly, the meaning of the name Hagar chose to give God in the desert. It is a powerful name, given by someone who was experiencing the awfulness of what it meant to be a victim.

### ***Towards Egypt***

Hagar travelled south through the Negev desert towards Egypt, and the word for the spring of water, 'Shur' (16:7), means 'wall', probably one of the walled forts that the Egyptians of ancient times built in the desert to prevent the invasion of northern tribes from Canaan, Jordan and beyond. The fact that she reached an Egyptian fort probably means that she almost reached her native home before the Lord intervened in the form of an angel (16:7) to persuade her to return! Certainly, it would have been a considerable act of faith in God to return having reached sight of 'home'.

In the Old Testament there is a thin line between the words of an angel and the words of the Lord God. This is because an angel was a messenger whose task was to convey God's Word. It was generally believed by God's people in ancient times that they could not 'see God' and live, because God was too holy to be looked upon (see, for example, the elaborate screening of God in His appearances to the people described in Exodus 19 and 20). It is impossible for us to read a story such as this and spot the point at which Hagar ceased to see the angel, and realised she was talking to God, but by the time the prophetic words of verse 12 were uttered, Hagar appears to have known that the one she had met with was God Himself, because she immediately proceeded to name Him (16:13 - see below).

### ***Guidance by an angel***

The task of the angel was threefold. Firstly, he asked Hagar a question; 'where have you come from and where are you going?' (16:8) We who read scripture recognise the divine nature of this question from the angel, because in difficult circumstances, it is common for God to ask a question which is challenging but not aggressive (for example, after Eve and Adam had eaten the fruit of the tree of knowledge, God asked 'where are you' - Gen 3:9). The question in this case exposed Hagar's whole situation and condition (16:8), and her reply was itself typical of a human response to God's searching questioning; she knew where she had come from, but was not able to give an answer to where she was going, even though she was clearly on the way back to her homeland! (16:8) She was in need of some instruction and guidance. The angel told Hagar to go back to Abram's household to face the same situation from which she had fled (16:9). Earlier, when she had looked down on Sarai because of her own pregnancy, she had been looking for status and esteem (16:4), but the command of God was that she had to return and submit to her mistress (16:9) with all the potential for further ill-treatment that this implied. It seems a harsh command of God, until we remember that God has always called people to submission and service (which is what Jesus required of His disciples - see John 13:5ff).

The second word the angel brought to Hagar (16:10) was a promise that her own children would receive part of the same promise that had been given to Abram for his descendants; 'I will increase your offspring so much, they will be too many to count'. We do not know whether Hagar would have had any knowledge of the Covenant promises given to Abram by God; of increase in fame and wealth, of large numbers of offspring (12:2,3), of being a blessing to other nations (12:3), and of a possessing a land in which to dwell (12:7). Neither do we know much about how relationships worked in a nomadic family, but Hagar would at least have known that Abram had slept with her because he needed to have children, in order to secure the future of his household and his extended family. The angel's promise that she would bear Abram a son who would become a large 'family' was no small thing for Hagar, and it was the promise of a secure future; reaffirmed in Gen 17:20 and fulfilled in Gen 25:13-16. For us who read scriptures, it is an example of God's generosity to give to the child of Abram and Hagar a promise equivalent to one third of the Covenant promises reserved for the child of Abram and Sarai. Notice however that Hagar's child receives the same promise of being a large nation, but not of possessing the Land of Canaan or of being a blessing to 'all nations'! In conclusion, the church has traditionally regarded Abram's children as either 'elect' (through Sarai's child yet to be born) and receiving all the Covenant promises, or 'non-elect' (through Hagar and others see Gen 25:1f.) and not receiving the full Covenant promises..

The third word of the angel (16:11) was a word of prophecy. It confirmed the birth of Hagar's son and gave him the name Ishmael, meaning 'the Lord hears'; which itself explained the Lord's reaction to Hagar's situation; 'for the Lord has heeded your heartbreak' (16:11). Ishmael's name would thereafter be a reminder of the way that the Lord had worked to save his mother Hagar. However, prophetic words which follow are fraught with difficulty; 'he will be a wild ass of a man; his hand will be against everyone ...' (16:12). The word 'wild ass' means a type of wild donkey which was known to inhabit the desert but had resisted all attempts at domestication (see Job 24:5-8; Jer 2:24; Hosea 8:9). The implication is clear, the descendants of Ishmael would live outside the covenant 'Promised Land' and on their own resources; but this would lead them into

conflict with others nations. It seems that having received the one Covenant blessing of Abraham, the other two would be like a curse around his neck! No land, and no blessing!

### ***The 'God who sees'***

Despite the strange nature of the last part of the angel's message, the whole experience was sufficient to change Hagar's whole demeanour and intent. The last four verses do not record her journey home or how she was received when she reached Abraham's home. Scripture focuses on two things; the fact of the meeting between Hagar and God, and the consequence of the angelic vision which was the birth of Ishmael to Abram at the age of 86 (16:16); his only and first born son, up to this point in time!

Hagar's words and actions (16:13) subsequent to this angelic visitation are unique in scripture, and there is no other example in the Bible of someone ascribing a name to God in this way! For this reason alone the name 'El-roi' is unique (16:13). It expresses the truth of what happened from Hagar's point of view, which was that at some point, she realised that the angelic messenger was a thinly veiled disguise for God Himself. God had 'seen' her, and she had 'seen' God, and lived to tell the tale. The name 'El-roi' can be translated in a number of ways, possibly meaning 'God who has seen me'. It is almost impossible for us to enter into the mind of someone like Hagar who was of Egyptian origins, but became caught up in the household of a nomad who held a distinct belief in the God who guided him; but scripture is generous to this woman, who, like Melchizedek, was outside the strict line of God's Covenant blessing. The connection with Abram was nevertheless sufficient for her to be blessed, both with a son who became the forefather of other nations, and also with the distinction of being a character whose story conveys something of the truth of God's revelation. It is fascinating that the name given to God by Hagar does not celebrate simply her 'seeing' of God, but God's 'seeing' of her, and that may well be the importance of the name. What is revealed within Hagar's story and in her 'name' for God is that God acts prior to our need; and that, in itself, is a precious truth.

The place where Hagar was 'seen' by God was named accordingly (16:14) with the name 'Beer-lahai-roi' meaning something like this; 'well belonging to the living one, who sees me'. The names of places such as this sound very strange to us, but are no different in principle to the way in which many place names throughout the world are linked to past events and geographical features, in this case, the existence of a spring, or a wall (16:7 – see above) also called a well (15:14).

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## **Discipleship**

### **Application**

The story of Hagar sounds strange to our ears, but it does not take much to see within it something of the grace of God. Even human mistakes are taken care of by God in his divine management of all things. It is quite possible for each of us, like Abram, to do something that is against God's plan for our lives, and we have to take responsibility ourselves for the consequences of our actions. However, through trust in God, He will work to resolve the problems we create because His purposes are more important, and our place in His ways may be more significant than we perceive. Hagar, however, was an 'innocent' who found herself not so much doing wrong, but one who was wronged. She was the victim, and although an 'outsider' God still cared for her. It is part of the pastoral ministry of the church to discern the difference between one who has sinned, and one who is in a place of sin, guilt or shame because of the sins of others, as was Hagar. In this story, for example, Hagar did not have to repent of sin, all she needed to do was hear the word of the Lord and act on it in faithfulness. Hers was not the sin.

Perhaps this is the secret of the name of God 'El-roi'. The God who sees is the one who understands and knows the truth; He knows the difference between the sinner and the one sinned against. Later on in scripture, God's people go down into Egypt, become slaves, and are called out of Egypt again by the Lord, who 'sees' their slavery and acts to bring them deliverance. This is how the Lord deals with us. At those times when we find ourselves lost in a fog of sinfulness, either on our own part or of others, we have to rely on a God who 'sees' things clearly and can sort out messes which for us are unsolvable. But the Lord requires us to be faithful and respond to His word with obedience; that was the challenge for Hagar, and it is the same challenge for us.

### **Questions for groups**

1. Discuss in your groups what it means to be a 'victim' of other people's sin? How does God help us?
2. What does this passage of scripture teach you about angels? In what sense are angels real? Are they an apparition of God?

3. Share within your group any occasions in which you believe that God had 'seen' you in a special way, or you have 'seen' God.

## Discipleship challenges

- *If you have felt you are the victim of the sins of someone else, reflect on what happened and ask yourself whether you have dealt with this fully or whether the consequences of what happened still affect you. How can you let God redeem the situation?*
- *Go for a long walk and pray to the Lord asking Him to reveal Himself to you in new ways. If you have become distant from the Lord, ask Him to help you turn again to Him.*

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## Final Prayer

Lord Jesus, guide my lips to praise You in all I do and say. May my speech reflect what is good, may my actions display care, and may my thoughts be focused on the Good News of the Kingdom. Help me, therefore, to know Your presence, and practice it; in Your name Lord Jesus: AMEN.

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