

The
WOMEN
of the
BIBLE SPEAK

The WISDOM of 16 WOMEN
and THEIR LESSONS for TODAY

SHANNON BREAM



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INTRODUCTION

“This time will be different. It has to be.”

I often wonder what ran through the mind of the woman whose story is so powerful that it’s woven through three of the Gospels—yet we don’t even know her name. We do have plenty of details, though, about just how dire her situation was. She suffered with bleeding for twelve long years. During that time, she must have had moments of complete despondence.

In the time when she lived, this woman’s affliction would have caused her not only physical pain, but also emotional isolation. According to custom, she would not have been able to worship in a temple, and many would have considered her unclean. This likely would have meant she couldn’t touch the people she loved most: her own family and friends. She may have been banned from visiting markets or seeking any real community connections.

Mark tells us she “had suffered a great deal under the care of many doctors and had spent all she had, yet instead of getting better she grew worse” (Mark 5:26). After so many years, so many dead ends, there must have been times when she thought this was how her story would end: with her hopeless and helpless.

And yet, Mark goes on to tell us that “she had heard the reports about Jesus” (Mark 5:27). That was all it took for this disheartened woman to move forward.

Word of Jesus’s miracles had spread far and wide, and crowds

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often followed Him, pushing in on every side, eager to hear His words and see if He could make a difference in their lives. The stories gave root to the tiniest seed of hope in the woman's heart, a little green shoot that gave her the courage to take a big risk. Matthew maps out her strategy: "[S]he said to herself, 'If I only touch his cloak, I will be healed'" (Matthew 9:21).

So, that was the entirety of her plan: to get as close to Jesus as possible, touch His cloak, and receive a miracle. Bold! Remember, she likely wasn't even supposed to leave her home, certainly not to be in a crowd where she would come in contact with other people—not to mention Jesus Himself. In her despair, she must have felt there were no other options left.

When she finally got to where Jesus was, He was on His way to attend to the request of a powerful man who had begged Him to save his dying daughter. As was often the case, this attracted spectators. Mark describes it as a "great crowd" that "thronged about him" (Mark 5:24). The ailing woman worked her way close enough to reach out to the miracle worker she'd heard so much about.

Luke shares the powerful moment in the simplest language, writing, "She came up behind him and touched the edge of his cloak, and immediately her bleeding stopped" (Luke 8:44).

Mark says, "Immediately her bleeding stopped and she felt in her body that she was freed from her suffering" (Mark 5:29). That was it! But the story still wasn't over.

Jesus knew what had happened. He looked to the crowd and asked His disciples who had touched Him. You can almost hear the laughter in Peter's voice as he replies, "Master, the people are crowding and pressing against you" (Luke 8:45). Here's the thing: the woman knew that a man so powerful that mere contact with

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His garment would heal her would certainly figure out whom He had healed.

In both Mark and Luke, we're told that she went to Jesus in "fear and trembling," falling down before Him and telling Him "the whole truth." Was she afraid she was about to be exposed as an unclean rule-breaker who shouldn't even have been there? Jesus didn't berate or humiliate her in front of the enormous crowd hanging on His every word. Only He could have known in that moment just how much she had suffered or how she had courageously and humbly bundled all her hopes into the simple act of touching the hem of His garment. In all the Gospel accounts, He calls her "Daughter" and tells her, "Your faith has made you well." Think for a moment how those words must have felt to someone likely living as an outcast. Uttered, as they were, before the multitudes hanging on Jesus's every word, they would have constituted public acceptance.

Though *His power* was clearly the source of her healing, Jesus identified *her faith* as having activated her cure. After more than a decade of suffering, bad news, and financial ruin, she was finally free, healed in an instant—all because she dared reach out to Him for help when every earthly avenue had ended in nothing but loss and despair.

For many of us, 2020 was a year filled with pain: physical, financial, emotional, and mental. We often felt isolated, kept away from our loved ones, and disconnected from our houses of worship and the sense of community they provide. There were adversities we could not have imagined we'd face in our lifetimes. Hardships piled up, one on top of the other. And yet . . . there was hope. There was refuge. There was inspiration and healing.

Throughout the Bible, women are at the center of some of the

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most critical events. They were bold and brave, finding courage in the moments when everything hung in the balance. They were voices of truth and reason. They were steady and creative, following God's direction when it didn't make sense by the world's standards.

In this book, you'll hear their stories, watch the women come alive as we dig into their lives' significance. Individually, their accounts are powerful. Yet, here, we will consider the women in pairs, finding the commonalities in their callings and challenges. Some of the women knew one another. Others were connected simply by a thread of common purpose, one that becomes more illuminated as we study the women side by side. I pray you'll find comfort and hope as we take this journey together.

The Women of the Bible Speak

HarperCollins Publishers



SARAH AND HAGAR

Women of the Covenants

SARAH

(Genesis 11:27–12:20; 16:1–6; 17:15–19; 18:1–15;
20:1–18; 21:1–13; 23:1–9)

The facts of Sarah's life sound like an adventure story, full of twists and turns: She was settled into her life when her husband suddenly announced they'd be upending everything they knew to move way out of their comfort zone. She managed a wealthy household with a very complicated blended family—and that's not all. She bore no child of her own, and even when God made her a specific promise, she laughed it off as impossible. How surprised she must have been when the wildly unthinkable finally came true for her—but oh, how far off track she'd already gotten by taking matters into her own hands.

According to the Bible, Abraham twice denied being Sarah's husband to protect himself when a powerful ruler noticed just how beautiful she was and wanted her for himself. In the case involving Pharaoh, Sarah was already sixty-five years old! Think about how enduringly stunning her beauty must have been to draw so much attention, even as she was entering her golden years.

While many details about Sarah are unknown, we do know this: she was definitely skeptical of men in shining robes telling ninety-year-old women they would have babies.

So, who was she, beyond these few tidbits? In reading the story of Abraham and Sarah, it's hard not to focus on Abraham. After all, he was the one who received the call from God: "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you" (Genesis 12:1). It's the first hint we receive that this land God will show him, the promised land, is going to play a crucial part in salvation history. But along with the promises to Abraham, God repeatedly makes clear that Sarah will be a key player, that she will be "a mother of nations; kings of peoples shall come from her" (Genesis 17:16).

If Sarah objected to their journey, Scripture does not record it. In order to avoid a famine, she and Abraham journeyed from Ur to Haran, from Haran to Canaan, and then from Canaan to Egypt. Sarah supported her husband during the dispute with his nephew Lot and during the subsequent battle with the five kings of Canaan, when he had to ride to Lot's rescue. In Egypt, she was beautiful enough to attract Pharaoh's notice, which prompted Abraham to fudge the truth about who she really was.

If you're wondering why Abraham felt compelled to lie, remember that he was a refugee traveling through a foreign land. This was a period when powerful rulers could claim beautiful women simply because they wanted them. A protesting husband could pay with his life, a consequence of which Abraham would have been all too aware.

Ultimately, the other men moved by Sarah's beauty rejected

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her when they realized she was married. The Lord himself directly intervened to protect her by sending plagues, in the case of Pharaoh, and by visiting Abimelech with a warning. Abraham's fear put Sarah in danger and also put other men in a position where they could have sinned against God. Abraham's deceit didn't help anyone, and his behavior tells us something about his character: he was sometimes fearful and weak. In retrospect, it is rather remarkable that God chose a man like Abraham to be the patriarch of His chosen people, but perhaps He did this in order to demonstrate His power through Abraham's foolishness. As Paul notes in 2 Corinthians 12:9, God's "power is made perfect in weakness," and in 1 Corinthians 1:27, "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong."

In any case, Abraham's weakness of character had a marked influence on his marriage, and I often wonder how Sarah felt being placed in potential danger because of his decisions.

Sarah herself is voiceless until chapter 16 of the narrative, when, for the first time, she has something to say:

Now [Sarah], [Abraham's] wife, had borne him no children. But she had an Egyptian slave named Hagar; so she said to [Abraham], "The Lord has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my slave; perhaps I can build a family through her." [Abraham] agreed to what [Sarah] said. (Genesis 16:1-2)

It's almost as though Sarah were saying, *Okay, wait, hold up. I said nothing while you dragged us for hundreds of miles, from*

Chaldea to Canaan to Egypt and back again. I said nothing while you talked about this covenant with God that you somehow think you have and the special promises you say God has made you. But I've seen none of it happen, and if we're going to have an heir, then I'd better take matters into my own hands here.

The first time we hear Sarah speak, she has a plan, but we the readers know it's not God's plan. We know God is weaving an intricate story starring Isaac, but Sarah is still skeptical. Just the chapter before, God pledges to Abraham that "the one who will come from your own body shall be your heir" (Genesis 15:14). God had shown him the glittering night sky, promising him that his descendants would be as many as the stars in the sky: uncountable. Abraham was all in. The minute God said, *Jump*, Abraham said, *How high?* But highly uncertain that any of this would come to pass, Sarah wanted evidence. She appears to have been the practical one in the relationship. Not faithless, but not exactly trusting, either. So, she came up with the "solution" to what she saw as the problem of God's unfulfilled promise. Following ancient Near Eastern custom, Sarah hatched a plan to produce an heir: sending Abraham to "go into [her] maid," Hagar, so she could "obtain children through her."

But as sometimes happens when we stop trusting God's plan and go our own way, things went terribly wrong. The minute Hagar successfully conceived, the relationship between the two women imploded. In the Bible, Sarah complains to Abraham, "I put my slave in your arms, and now that she knows she is pregnant, she despises me" (Genesis 16:5). Hagar likely lorded her pregnancy over Sarah. Genesis 16:4 translates to show us that

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Hagar considered Sarah a person of no standing because she was barren.

So, then, the far younger Hagar was the only one bearing a child for Abraham. It might have been natural for Hagar to assume that her relationship with both Sarah and Abraham had changed. Her status had surely improved, and as the mother of Abraham's sole heir, she had security for the future.

So, what was Abraham's reaction to the news that his wife's now-pregnant servant despised her? Did he urge calm? Did he try to hear both sides of the dispute? Not exactly. Abraham said to his wife, "Your slave is in your hands. Do with her whatever you think best" (Genesis 16:6).

This is now the second time we see Abraham acquiesce to his wife's wishes, when we know Sarah is in the wrong. Their relationship comes into sharper focus now, and it is a complicated one, marked by times when she speaks her mind and times when she silently follows his lead. In this instance, he attempted to restore peace in his relationship with Sarah by demolishing his relationship with the pregnant Hagar. *Do whatever you please*, he tells his wife, and Sarah does. The Bible tells us that Sarah "dealt harshly" with Hagar (Genesis 16:6). It's the same wording the Bible uses for the way the Egyptians treat their Jewish slaves in Exodus, meaning with oppression and forced labor. Abraham gave Sarah complete authority over Hagar, knowing what it would mean for the servant woman, and he stood by while Sarah abused the pregnant woman with impunity.

In reading any memoir or history of slavery in the American South or the Caribbean, we find the stories detailing the mistreatment of pregnant women the most gut-wrenching. It's impossible for us, as modern readers, to dredge up any sympathy

for Sarah at this point. But like the men of the Bible, the women of the Bible are complicated. They are, on the whole, neither fully good nor completely bad people, but simply people, in all their messy and uncomfortable humanity. And it's when we can see them in their full humanity that God can teach us something about ourselves.

The next time we hear from Sarah, she is once again skeptical of God's plan. In one of the Bible's most enigmatic stories, God appears to Abraham at his tent by the oaks of Mamre and tells him that Sarah will bear a son. The story is a strange one because the first verse of the chapter says that "God appeared" to Abraham, but then the very next sentence says that "three men stood before him" (Genesis 18:1-2). Whatever happened at Mamre, it is clear that this was a very unusual visit. And this time, it wasn't just Abraham God had come to see.

"Where is your wife Sarah?" the three men ask him.

"There, in the tent," he says.

Then one of them says, "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son" (Genesis 18:9,10).

This was a message for Sarah, loud and clear. When God appeared to Abraham before, He had told him that he would have a son of his body. This time, He was more explicit: it will be a son of Abraham's body *and* of Sarah's. She is central to this covenant narrative. She is an equal recipient of the promise, and it's almost as though God were saying, *Pay attention this time!*

Sarah did, and her reaction was immediate: she laughed! She laughed, one of the most extraordinary reactions to a revelation from God recorded in the Bible. However, don't forget, just one chapter earlier, Abraham was just as incredulous:

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Abraham fell facedown; he laughed and said to himself, “Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?” (Genesis 17:17)

At this point, Sarah was done with all revelations, all promises. She had seen enough. She had hoped long enough, she had tried long enough, she had twisted her life into knots enough. No more! And so, when the big reveal came, she laughed. *Tell me another*, Sarah thought.

And God took note.

“Why did Sarah laugh?” (Genesis 18:13), He asks. “Is anything impossible with God?” (Genesis 18:14). We can imagine Abraham turning several vivid shades of purple with embarrassment during this exchange. Sarah hastily tries to fix it, too. She denies laughing, but God responds, “No, you did laugh” (Genesis 18:15). The climactic moment of God’s revelation to Abraham has just become the world’s most disastrous dinner party.

We hear Sarah’s voice in the text once more with the birth of Isaac, nine months later:

Now the Lord was gracious to Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah what he had promised. Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the very time God had promised him. Abraham gave the name Isaac to the son Sarah bore him. When his son Isaac was eight days old, Abraham circumcised him, as God commanded him. Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him.

Sarah said, “God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me.” And she

added, “Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age.” (Genesis 21:1-7)

Sarah’s laughter had been transformed: first into the name of the child and then into joy. Was she also laughing at her own disbelief and the renewal of her faith through this miraculous event? The laughter that at first she attempted to deny has now become an object of commemoration in the very name of her son, “Isaac”—or “Yitzchak” in the Hebrew, meaning “laughter.” But that laughter is no longer the snide, mocking laughter of disbelief. It is now the laughter of joy, and Sarah invites others to join in it with her. It is the laughter of the reversal of all expectations, of resurrection, of hope reborn to new life. And her son’s name is her nod of the head to God, her acknowledgment that not only was God right and she wrong, but that she, too, was included in the covenant and that she, too, was the recipient of promise.

It would be wonderful to end the story of Sarah here, but that is not where Scripture leaves her. For Sarah’s story is intertwined with Hagar’s from beginning to end, from Sarah’s first words in the text, when she offers Hagar to Abraham, to her last words in the text, when she drives Hagar and Ishmael into the desert. Far from feeling calmer and more confident in God and in herself after Isaac’s birth, Sarah seems instead to be on high alert.

When Isaac was three years old, the traditional age of weaning, Genesis 21 tells us that Sarah saw his older brother, Ishmael, “laughing”—some translations suggest “mocking.” The Bible doesn’t tell us anything more than that. Something about what she saw triggered a fresh backlash by Sarah. Did she feel

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that Ishmael's presence made her son seem less special, less extraordinary—after all, wasn't Ishmael a son of Abraham, too? And who was to say that, in later years, Ishmael might not grow jealous or full of hatred and threaten her beloved son? As we see again and again in the polygamous relationships the Bible documents, jealousy and division are almost always present among family members.

Sarah says to Abraham, "Get rid of that slave woman and her son, for that woman's son will never share in the inheritance with my son Isaac" (Genesis 21:10).

Did Sarah go too far this time in asking Abraham to end his relationship with his eldest son, to send him away so that he may never see him again? How could Sarah ask such a thing?

But nothing is a surprise to God or a barrier to His plans, and He reassured Abraham. God didn't tell Abraham that Sarah was right, but He did tell him that Ishmael would be a great nation, and under His protection. So, with that promise, perhaps Abraham felt confident that no harm would come to the boy or his mother and that, in order to preserve peace in his family, it would be best to send them away. So, off into the desert Hagar and Ishmael went, to a fate unknown to Sarah and Abraham.

We do not hear Sarah's voice again, though other voices in Scripture refer to her. She is called "the mother of promise" (Romans 9:9) and the "mother of faith" (Hebrews 11:11), and Peter refers to her as the model wife (1 Peter 3:6).

There is one more great event recorded in the life of Abraham and Sarah, before the narrative moves on to the next generation. God has a test in mind for Abraham: He asks him to take his one remaining child, the child of covenant and promise, his son

Isaac, and offer him as a human sacrifice. It is hard for us to imagine being asked to do the same with our own beloved children, but do not forget what Abraham had already witnessed: God's unending faithfulness. He had already watched as God kept His promise, bringing a newborn baby to a one-hundred-year-old man and his ninety-year-old wife. Hebrews 11:19 gives us insight into what Abraham must have been thinking:

By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had embraced the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said to him, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead, and so in a manner of speaking he did receive Isaac back from death.

Because Abraham had already heard God's promises and seen them come to fruition, Hebrews is suggesting that Abraham believed that, even if he were called to sacrifice Isaac, God could bring him back to life.

Did Abraham tell Sarah what he was doing? This is the great question. He didn't tell Isaac, which is understandable. Not only did he need the child's compliance, but he didn't want to frighten him.

The story of Abraham trudging toward the spot where God had called him to sacrifice Isaac is a difficult one to read. We now know the end of the story, but in those hours and days, Abraham couldn't have known how things would unfold. Genesis 22:6 reveals his deep faith in the journey:

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He said to his servants, “Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you.”

He is stating his clear belief that the two will return together, despite what God is asking of him.

Isaac must have been bewildered, even frightened at some point, as Abraham followed through, reaching for the very knife “to slay his son . . .”:

. . . the angel of the Lord called out to him from heaven, “Abraham! Abraham!”

“Here I am,” he replied.

“Do not lay a hand on the boy,” he said. “Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son.”

(Genesis 22:10)

And then, of course, the bleating of the ram in the thicket, quickly retrieved to become the sacrifice instead of Isaac. The high drama of it makes for an incomparable story, but Sarah saw none of it. All this happened out of her sight and, perhaps, her knowledge.

If God had applied the same test to Sarah, what would she have done? From what we know of Sarah, it’s hard to believe she would have saddled that donkey and taken her son to be sacrificed. It’s hard to imagine any mother who has borne a child in her body saying yes to that. How does any of us react when our faith is put to the test, whether through periods of doubt and

despair, the death of a loved one, infertility, or financial ruin? Often, we are asked to be *willing* to sacrifice what feels most precious to us. Do we, as Abraham did, proceed in faith or look for our own way out? Sarah, who longed so desperately for her own child, made a decision that forever altered history. And yet God chose her to be the human fulfillment of His covenant with Abraham, “the mother of Israel the nation” (Isaiah 51:2). Again, despite our flaws, we can be used by our Heavenly Father to weave together His highest purposes. Sarah is the perfect illustration of that beautiful, complex truth.

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HAGAR

(Genesis 16:1–16, 21:8–21)

Of all the women we are looking at in the pages of this book, Hagar is the only non-free person. Many Bible translations define her status as “maidservant,” which makes her sound like someone who showed up to do semi-regular cleaning. While the language in Genesis 16 suggests she is a trusted servant of Sarah’s, by Genesis 21, the language shifts to indicate that Hagar is by then viewed as no more than a slave. She was not free to come and go as she pleased, but was the property of her owner, Sarah. This is the dominant feature of Hagar’s life and the one that colors everything else we know about her and her situation.

The Bible tells us that Hagar is an Egyptian. It makes sense that Sarah might have acquired her when she and Abraham lived in Egypt during the time of famine described in Genesis 12:10, when she and Abraham practiced their deception on Pharaoh by telling him that she was Abraham’s sister, not his wife. It’s possible Abraham and Sarah were figures of some wealth and power by the time of their sojourn in Egypt. After all, most people traveling to Egypt probably weren’t worried about what they would tell Pharaoh, as common people didn’t usually come in contact with royalty. However, Genesis 12:15 tells us it is Sarah’s great presence that attracts the high-level attention. A person with disposable wealth might well have acquired slaves in Egypt, which he would then have transported with him back to Canaan. And Hagar did not appear to be just any slave, hired to tend to the camels and cook; she was the personal attendant of Abraham’s wife, Sarah.

The facts we know of Hagar’s life are few and simple. She was

offered to Abraham as a concubine by Sarah. (As a servant, Hagar would not have been asked her opinion on the matter.) She bore Abraham's firstborn son, Ishmael, and was then entangled in a combative relationship with Sarah, compelled to leave not once but twice—first, while pregnant and, again, later (for good), after Sarah's son was born. These short, brutal facts make it hard not to feel compassion for her.

But Hagar's life (and its impact) is so much larger than what happens to her in the pages of Genesis. Her story goes on. Paul himself, in Galatians, shows how her life illustrates important lessons for Christians:

For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and the other by the free woman. His son by the slave woman was born according to the flesh, but his son by the free woman was born as the result of a divine promise.

These things are to be taken figuratively: the women represent two covenants. One covenant is from Mount Sinai and bears children who are to be slaves. This is Hagar.

Now you, brothers and sisters, like Isaac, are children of promise.

Therefore, brothers and sisters, we are not children of the slave woman, but of the free woman. (Galatians 4:22-24, 28, 31)

Paul draws a simple but powerful equation: Hagar and her son represent a condition of bondage, and Sarah and her son represent freedom. For Paul, Christianity means freedom, and observ-

ing the Jewish law means bondage. The law was good, but it had no power to free the human race from the slavery of sin. It was the covenant promise, which flowed through Sarah and Isaac, that brought freedom through Christ. Here, Paul is talking to Gentile Christians who have converted to Christ but who question whether they must also observe Jewish law. *What are you doing?* Paul says. *You already have everything you need for salvation, and you don't need to be adding more burdens to yourself!* Paul rebukes some who infiltrated the Church in Galatia, arguing that members need not only trust in Christ but also keep all the old Jewish laws and traditions. He nudges new believers to look deeper than the literal meaning of the text, to discover the spiritual truths inside it. And in the process of doing that, Hagar becomes a symbol.

For Christians who were deeply in love with Jesus and seeing Him everywhere, this kind of symbolic reading became a natural way to see Christ in the pages of the Bible. In 1 Corinthians, Paul talks about the miraculous rock from which the Hebrew people drank when in the wilderness: “All ate the same spiritual food,” he says, “and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank of that spiritual Rock which followed them, and that Rock was Christ” (1 Corinthians 10:3–4). For these early Christians, Christ and His truth appeared symbolically everywhere in the Scriptures. Suddenly, the pages of the Bible were illuminated! Christians continued to read the Scriptures this way through the generations, and especially the Hagar story. In later Christian writings, Hagar came to mean bondage not just to the law, but to the entire sinful condition of humanity—the city of this world. The unredeemed were the “children of Hagar,” exiles from the body of Christ and from heaven itself.

In all these symbolic readings, it is easy to lose sight of Hagar the person—because before she was anything else, Hagar was a person, a vulnerable woman without any real protectors in the world, an enslaved woman who was never given any choices, a mother who wanted life and happiness for her son. If we can separate Hagar from the layers of symbolism heaped on her by later generations, we can recover some sense of who she was and what she might have to say to us today.

We meet Hagar in two incidents, and they both involve her mistress, Sarah. God had promised children to Abraham, but Sarah had given him none. That's when Sarah hatched her plan to offer Hagar as Abraham's concubine, in the hope of providing him with a legal heir. After Hagar became pregnant, her relationship with Sarah changed. We learn that when Hagar learned she was pregnant, "she began to despise her mistress" (Genesis 16:4). The Hebrew here is as enigmatic as the English, but it appears Hagar holds Sarah in lower regard because, while she herself is fertile, her mistress remains barren.

Hagar's change of attitude is understandable. After all, the likelihood is that she wasn't consulted about becoming a concubine in the first place, just as she wasn't consulted about being purchased by Sarah and Abraham. Her life and her body were not her own. Being pregnant with the master's child was her first opportunity for a kind of freedom. Suddenly, she was not just disposable property. She had worth! But that worth was not because of who she was, but because of the child inside her. It must have been bittersweet to realize that, finally, she would be a person of value, but that that value would be attached to her child, not to her. Still, any value was better than no value. Hagar might well have assumed that from then on, things would be different. She

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might have assumed that the sort of menial labor she was doing before would no longer be required of the woman bearing the master's child. And Sarah—who so conspicuously could not bear the master's child—might have resented her for it, no matter what Hagar did.

Again and again, the Bible presents us with the struggle over infertility. We will see this drama play itself out again in Rachel and Leah, and in Hannah. For women of the Bible, fertility meant more than just the love of a child. It meant more than just a way for a woman to gain security and status in the world. Fertility was often viewed as divine favor itself. Some believed that to bear a child was to wear a mark of God's love, and to be barren was therefore a mark of God's displeasure. But it's important to note that from the moment God creates Eve, she is a person of value because she is created in His very image. In our Heavenly Father's eyes, we as women are treasured and honored wholly and apart from the gift of motherhood. (Much more on Rachel, Leah, and Hannah in the chapters ahead.)

Did Hagar show Sarah compassion as she suffered this agony and humiliation? We see no indication that there was any tenderness in their relationship, or any mutual caring. Whatever bond they did have was probably ruptured by Hagar's pregnancy. Sarah mistreated the pregnant Hagar, and Hagar did the sensible thing: she ran away. It wasn't just herself she had to look after, but also her unborn child. And Abraham made it clear that he was unwilling to protect her, even if she was pregnant with his child. So, Hagar ran to the wilderness, probably hoping to find some solution there, or another path in life, or some kind of escape. What she found instead was the angel of the Lord:

The angel of the Lord found Hagar near a spring in the desert; it was the spring that is beside the road to Shur. 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. Then the angel of the Lord told her, “Go back to your mistress and submit to her.” (Genesis 16:7–9)

The first thing to note here is that if the “angel of the Lord” asks you where you’re going, it’s a sure bet He already knows. But God always gives us an opportunity to be honest with him. Think about the first question God asks in the Bible: “Adam, where are you?” In much the same way, the angel here asked Hagar, inviting her to be honest—which she was. But God’s answer was not an easy one. God told her to go back, to give up her hard-won freedom. How much Hagar must have wanted to shout, “No!” The thought of going back must have been unbearable. And then came the difficult words that none of us ever wants to hear: humble yourself. What a seemingly impossible, painful thing God was asking of her.

This is the first appearance of the angel of the Lord in the Bible. And this mighty angel doesn’t come to a king or to a priest, but to a pregnant slave girl who is alone and cowering in fear in the wilderness. She had no defender or encourager in this world, and yet the God of heaven wanted Hagar to know that He saw and heard her in her distress.

The angel tells her that “the Lord has heard of your misery” (Genesis 16:11). This must have been astonishing news, for more than one reason. For one thing, Hagar was not of Abraham’s family. She was Egyptian, not even from Abraham’s home of

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Ur. She probably didn't even speak their language all that well, and there's a good chance she did not worship the strange and singular God they worshipped. Why would that God care about her? But He came to her, in her fear and her desolation. He *saw* her.

So, who was it Hagar saw, exactly? After the angel of the Lord told her to go back to Sarah, he delivered a promise. He gave her a message, using words that (for a Christian) echo the words spoken by another, much later, angel:

**"You are now pregnant and you will give birth to a son.
You shall name him Ishmael . . ." (Genesis 16:11)**

But when the visitation was done, what did Hagar say? As far as she was concerned, she had a direct and unmediated vision of God Himself. She even gave God a name—the first person in the Bible to do so:

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." (Genesis 16:13)

She said that the one who appeared to her was "El Ro-i," which means, literally, "the God of seeing." God had seen her, and she had seen God. Hagar had been perfectly seen and known. Think about what that must have meant for an enslaved woman. How many eyes had looked right past or through her in her life? Visitors to Abraham's tent, people in the slave market of Egypt—she would have been no more than furniture to them, something people glanced at and then away from. She was used to being

unseen. But this God was not like that. God looked right at her, and for the first time in her life, Hagar was seen.

An experience like that might have made it possible for her to go back to Sarah. Once you have looked into the eyes of God and seen Him looking back at you, even the impossible can seem doable. In the passage just before this one, God appears to Abraham and seals His covenant with him. The Bible tells us that God came to him “in a vision,” and that Abraham heard “the voice of the Lord” (Genesis 15:1). Their covenant was sealed. But in Hagar’s case, God appeared and offered His love and compassion. He gave her what she likely wanted and needed most: someone to see her as she truly was.

The knowledge of that God stayed with Hagar in her second trial, too, a time when the power of His words must have served as some comfort when things went from bad to worse. After Sarah was finally granted her child, and Isaac was three years old, Hagar was sent away in a more formal sense, the Bible’s language suggesting a deliberate action that may have stripped away Hagar’s identity, her inheritance, and likely her hope. It did her no good that she was the mother of Abraham’s firstborn son; once again, the father of her child failed to defend her. Abraham had God’s assurance that Hagar and Ishmael would be fine, but the Bible doesn’t tell us if he shared that assurance with Hagar. She was sent off into the punishing desert with the bare minimum of supplies, and it wasn’t enough to sustain the two of them. Hagar was quickly out of options:

When the water in the skin was gone, she put the boy under one of the bushes. Then she went off and sat down about a bowshot away, for she thought, “I cannot watch

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the boy die.” And as she sat there, she began to sob. (Genesis 21:15-16)

In one of the most heartrending passages in Scripture, Hagar acknowledges that watching her son’s death will be the final grief she cannot bear. She despaired. Everyone had abandoned her, and she could no longer keep her son safe from a world that had no use for a slave woman’s son.

Many of us are fortunate enough to live in a world where we don’t have to fear every day for our children’s lives or safety. We tell ourselves that we have made them safe, that the trappings of middle-class life can keep them safe. If we are privileged enough, we enroll them in good schools, take them to good doctors, keep a close eye on their activities. All too often, though, we fail to consider the anguish of mothers who can’t do these things for their children. For the poor and downtrodden in this world, these basic safeguards are often unattainable. For those mothers whose children face hatred and discrimination, safety is often impossible to guarantee. And the truth is, all of us are all one terrible, unimaginable catastrophe away from being in Hagar’s shoes.

But God was not done with Hagar:

God heard the boy crying, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, “What is the matter, Hagar? Do not be afraid; God has heard the boy crying as he lies there. Lift the boy up and take him by the hand, for I will make him into a great nation.” (Genesis 21:17-18)

God reached into Hagar’s despair and sent an angel to speak gentle and comforting words to her. The angel said to her the

words that angels say again and again in the Bible: *Do not fear!* These words are said by an angel for the first time in the Bible when they are said to Hagar—the same words an angel says to Zechariah and to Mary, to Joshua and to the women at Jesus’s tomb. They are also the words God Himself speaks to Abraham when He says, “Do not be afraid! I am your shield and will be your exceedingly great reward” (Genesis 15:1). Hagar is addressed in the same words that God uses for Abraham because this is the God who truly sees and who recognizes no distinction between the wealthy patriarch and the sorrowful slave. The “God Who Sees” is the God who sees not with the eyes of the world, but with the eyes of heaven.

How might Hagar’s and Sarah’s stories have been different if their relationship had been different? If they had found a way to connect with each other, to forgive each other, to understand each other’s grief, what would have changed? What would have been the same? It could be that all that would have been necessary was for Hagar to have reached out to her mistress with compassion and generosity, even if Sarah showed her none. Kindness to someone who has been unkind to us is hard, but what about kindness to someone who has been unjust to us for years and years? Or kindness to someone who has oppressed us? That’s where the hard starts to seem impossible.

But if Hagar had found a way to extend that hand, then Sarah might not have driven her away. Alternatively, if Sarah had been willing to overlook Hagar’s disrespect and recognize how insecure she felt, perhaps she could have found commonalities between them. Both women were valued by God, who cherished and understood them. What if they had reflected their covenant with God by entering into a covenant with each other? It’s possi-

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ble that in a world like that, Ishmael and Isaac could have grown up together. What would it have looked like, a world in which the ancestor of the Jews and the ancestor of the Arabs had grown up arm in arm, as beloved brothers who could not bear to be separated? It isn't just human hearts that might have been different then, but the map of the world. Who knows what future maps our hearts can rewrite if we can somehow find our way to compassion for one another?

Sarah and Hagar Study Questions

1. God appears to Abraham six times. Take a look at each of those six times and figure out what God is asking of him in each of these appearances.

Genesis 12:1–3 (the instruction to leave Haran)

Genesis 15:1–21 (the first covenant)

Genesis 17:1–22 (the renewed covenant)

Genesis 18:1 (the appearance at the oaks of Mamre)

Genesis 18:20 (Abraham pleads for Sodom)

Genesis 22:1–18 (Moriah)

2. What is the relationship of Sarah to each of these appearances? In which ones is she involved? In which ones is she absent? Which ones seem to apply to her, and which ones don't? When we read the Bible, it's important to look beyond just the passage we're reading. The Bible's divisions into chapters happened only in the medieval era, almost a thousand years after some of these texts were written. So, for ancient readers, there was no real break between what came before a passage and what came after it. How might that change what we see of Sarah in these six passages?

For instance, look at the covenant passage of Genesis 15:1–21. If we are reading like an ancient reader, we see that this passage goes immediately into Sarah's discussion with Abraham about Hagar and having an heir through her maidservant. What does this tell us about

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Sarah's relationship to the covenant? What does it tell us about her relationship to Abraham? What does it tell us about her relationship to God?

3. The Bible tells us that Sarah died and was buried in the field Abraham had bought—his first foothold in the land of Canaan, the purchase that turned him from a nomad into a landowner, a stakeholder in the community of Canaan. What is the very first action that Abraham undertakes after her death? Take a look at Genesis 24:1–8. What does this tell us about the importance of Sarah to Abraham? What does it tell us about the importance of Sarah to Isaac?
4. Hagar leaves Abraham and Sarah twice. The first time (Genesis 16:6–14), God sends her back. The second time (Genesis 21:14–21), Abraham and Sarah send her away. What is the difference between the two times? Has anything changed in Hagar between these two events?

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