



Who Sees Me

Genesis 16:1-15

If when we are doing well, there are occasions in which relationships are difficult, when we are under stress what had been simply difficult becomes much worse. The pressure increases just as the desire to escape the pressures of life. It is very common that we seek quick solutions that are not always the best. Waiting on God, trusting in God's unseen provision, drains us emotionally. In many cases, we end up acting in ways that hurt others or even ourselves, for our attention remains on our difficulties, and not on God's character or on the responsibilities on which we should focus.

This is what happened with Sarai. She was anguished about having no sons. From the social setting and context of the day, she may well have been a mother to daughters, even if the text is quiet in that regard. Regardless, she at least had no son to present to her husband. Without ignoring what a son means to many women today, for Sarai a son meant an heir as well as her support and provision in her old age. Having a son was extremely important in determining her value as a person and a productive woman. The years passed and Sarai saw the growth only of her anguish and anxiety. The son she so badly wanted was beyond her grasp. It seemed impossible.

Sarai took a decision that stemmed from her desperation. She decided not to wait on God, nor to seek God's direction. He decided to follow the manner of the powerful of her day and society. There was a solution before her by which she could take advantage of her slave girl as a substitute mother. She would give her slave girl Hagar to lie with Abraham as a surrogate, accepting the son of their union as her own. At the baby's birth, she would receive him on her lap, designating him as hers. It would resolve the question of her infertility, at least in legal terms, even if her strategy would not turn out to be everything she imagined.

She could not see the consequences of her actions. She could not see the unexpected. She did not perceive that her decisions would bring her greater anguish instead of stilling the anxieties she already had. After having taken advantage of Hagar, Sarai became jealous as a result of her plan. If beforehand she felt undervalued in light of her infertility, now she felt worse. As if that were insufficient, Hagar was pregnant with her husband's son and was proud of her good fortune. Sarai's plans, desires, and impotence filled her with anger and cast her into an even greater depression.

Sarai began to mistreat Hagar to placate her own guilt and sense of worthlessness. She once again abused her position, mistreating her slave such that she fled into the wilderness. Sarai had not sought God's guidance before, nor did she now. On recognizing her impotence, she returned to the custom of abusing others, instead of seeking direction from the One with authority and real power.

Hagar fled from Sarai. She fled from the mistreatment she received. She fled because of her powerlessness toward Sarai. She understood it simply as her position in the world and there was no solution for her difficulties, since there was no one to plead her cause. The mistreatment received affected her manner of seeing others. She expected nothing more than the same she had been receiving. In her desperation she fled and found herself before the Presence of one she did not expect to find in her flight. She found herself in the presence of Yahweh, the God of her masters, Abram and Sarai.

There in the wilderness she sought escape from her problems. She hoped to escape the abuse she received at the hands of her mistress. She first felt the abuse of being cast down as something of no value for the satisfaction of her mistress' husband. Soon she felt despised for having fulfilled her mistress' orders. Hagar was not completely innocent in her actions and attitudes, but she felt the weight of the actions of

others, which blocked her recognition of her own deeds. So it is almost always in our interpersonal relationships. Hagar and Sarai, both believed themselves victims, while both were guilty from different perspectives.

Hagar fled from her situation of abuse, seeking a better path for her life. She fled thinking she was alone, with no hope of help. She felt abused, despised, and a victim of abuse. On feeling stripped of every source of support, she fled into the wilderness. What she found in this seemingly forgotten and godforsaken place was God arriving to her encounter.

She was not prepared for this. She expected to face many things. She was ready to suffer thirst and hunger. She expected to meet poisonous snakes, wild animals and other deadly dangers. She did not expect that Yahweh, her master's God, would be paying her attention, a slave girl run over by the unconsidered actions of Sarai and Abram. An arid and desert land was a land considered as abandoned both by gods and by people. It should have been a place where the gods had not given their attention, as they gave no heed to planting and watering this place. It was not a place one would expect a god to come to one's encounter. Regardless, this is exactly what happened with Hagar. In the place she least expected God to be aware of her and her needs, that is exactly where Yahweh came to meet her.

She arrived in the wilderness in desperation. There she was met by a messenger of God. Her desperation was transformed in surprise. From feeling herself a victim, she found herself the recipient of God's attention and provision, the same Yahweh her masters Abram and Sarai served. While she earlier thought she would die isolated in the desert to escape abuse at her mistress' treatment, now she saw herself privileged enough by God to return to her mistress. Her situation had not changed, but the way she saw her life in light of this encounter with God had changed everything. Yes, she returned to mistreatment, but these did not define her or her value. God was in the midst of her circumstances and He saw her while she was a simple slave girl, victimized by her masters.

Many things change with a simple shift of perspective. Many things change with appreciating that God sees one in the midst of anguishing circumstances. Hagar was still a slave. Hagar was still a victim. Hagar still had neither the position nor rights of a wife. Hagar was still in a position to be abused as an object, but one thing had changed. She now saw that God had something more for her than what she had seen at the moment of her flight. God saw her. God had grace that reached her and her yet unborn child. God saw her and took interest in her.

She returned from the wilderness to life with Abram and Sarai. She returned recognizing the discomfort she still faced. Now, however, she did not feel abandoned or despised, for God had her in mind, in his purposes, and in his plans to bless her. She returned with a new perspective on the identity of Yahweh and the reach of God's grace. She returned looking less at the circumstances of her life and the problems in relation to her mistress. She looked more to the presence of God, the God who saw and cared for her.

Hagar understood that even in circumstances of abuse and desperation God saw her and was aware of her difficulties. Sarai still needed to learn the same lesson. She still did not trust God completely, but she was beginning to see that her actions to solve what was beyond her reach did not accomplish anything. How do we react amid our difficulties? Do we try to resolve our difficulties according to our human understanding or seek the God who sees us?

—*Christopher B. Harbin*