

The God Who Sees Me

Charles Fry

When Abram was seventy-five years old, he left most of his family behind and went to Canaan, as God had commanded him (Genesis 12:1-5). After spending some time camping from place to place in Canaan, Abram and his group went into Egypt for awhile because there was famine in the region (Genesis 12:10-13:1). After some time in Egypt Abram returned to Canaan, richer in livestock and servants than he had been before. One of the servants probably acquired in Egypt was a young woman named Hagar who belonged to Abram's wife, Sarai (Genesis 16:1).

About ten years after Abram had first come to Canaan, his wife, Sarai, proposed that they should build a family through the Egyptian servant woman, Hagar, since they had no children of their own. God had promised Abram offspring (Genesis 12:2, 15:4-6), but after such a long time the conclusion that Sarai would never bear a child, already being seventy-five years old, seemed certain. So Abram and Sarai decided to accomplish God's promise in their own way (as many believers have attempted over the centuries). Soon, Hagar was pregnant with Abram's child, a boy who would be born when Abram was eighty-six years old (Genesis 16:16).

Unfortunately, as often happens when people determine to accomplish God's promises by their own devices, things quickly became difficult in Abram's household, with complications that never went away (even to this day). As soon as Hagar was pregnant with Abram's heir, she imagined that her position in the household would change, as indeed it would have in many households of that era (Genesis 16:4), and she thought she would rise above her mistress. Sarai complained to Abram about Hagar's changed attitude, blaming him, and he in turn effectively washed his hands of the matter, telling Sarai, "Your slave is in your hands, do with her whatever you think best." Consequently, Sarai treated Hagar badly, and Hagar fled the household (Genesis 16:6).

When Hagar ran away from Sarai, she encountered the Lord's angel by a spring, a water well, in a remote area (Genesis 16:7-14). As often happens in Biblical accounts of such divine encounters, the angel made it plain he knew all about her, identifying her by name and household, but nevertheless asking her where she had come from and where she was going. Hagar promptly admitted that she was a runaway slave. What happened next may seem quite odd to the "modern" reader, as the Lord commanded Hagar to go home "to your mistress and submit to her." Few counselors today would urge someone to return to an abusive master, but God has unwaveringly called upon his people to be humble, meek, respectful, and submissive in obedience to Him. Christians are called to submission to other believers (Ephesians 5:21), wives submitting to their own husbands (Ephesians 5:22-33, 1 Peter 3:1-6), submission to ruling authorities (Romans 13:1-7, 1 Peter 2:13-17), and slaves submitting to their masters (Ephesians 6:5-8), even harsh masters (1 Peter 2:18-21). Such submission is a persistent principle of godly living, exemplified most dramatically and thoroughly by Jesus himself (1 Peter 2:21-25). Contrary to a common theme of our contemporary sensibilities, contrary to Hagar's own wishes, she was to go back to Sarai, and submit to her who had been harsh. Doing so would ensure that her son would be born in his father's household, and despite all appearances to the contrary, it was her own best choice.

When the Lord's angel spoke to Hagar at the well, he promised a multitude of descendants through the son she would soon give birth to (Genesis 16:9-12) and directed her to name the boy "Ishmael" which means "God hears," because "God has heard of your misery." This must have been quite startling to Hagar, that the Lord was paying attention to her, listening to her, cared about her, and was making promises to her. Hagar expressed her surprise and delight that God took notice of her, a runaway slave with no resources, by calling the Lord "the God who sees me" (Genesis 16:13-14) and naming the well where the Lord spoke to her "the well of the Living One who sees me." Unlike the gods of Egypt where she was born, the Lord paid attention to ordinary people like Hagar, cared about her personally, and had plans and purposes for her and her progeny.

Hagar did as the Lord directed, went home and bore Abram a son, who was given the name “Ishmael” by Abram (Genesis 16:15). One thing this naming tells us is that Hagar told Abram of her conversation with the angel, and Abram believed it. Abram gave the boy the name God had given to Hagar.

Centuries after the time of Abram and Hagar, David wrote, “God looks down from heaven on all mankind to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God” (Psalms 53:2). In fact, the consistent testimony of the Bible is that the all-seeing Creator pays attention to everything and everyone all the time in all of creation. Psalm 139 especially highlights that God knows each of us before we are born, is present everywhere we go, and knows everything we do. He is not a God far off, but a God constantly observing and interacting with the cosmos he made, including every person everywhere (note also Matthew 6:1-6).

Two thousand years after Abram and Hagar, and a thousand years after David, Jesus encountered another woman at another well, a story recounted in John 4. In his conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well, Jesus, like the angel in Genesis 16, asked her questions he already knew the answer to. Talking with Jesus she concluded that he was God’s chosen one because he “told me everything I ever did” (John 4:29). Like Hagar the Egyptian slave before her, this Samaritan woman realized that the “God who sees me” knew her, and cared about her, and sought her out so that she might also know him.