

Sunday October 1, 2023

Lesson 5: Can God Open Your Eyes?

Scripture: Genesis 21: 9-21

**Context:**

Today we continue our fall curriculum, “God Provides.” The second unit is titled “Living Water,” with several lessons of how God’s providence comes in the form of water, a simultaneous chaotic and replenishing element. Today’s first lesson in this unit comes from the book of Genesis, the beginning of the Bible. The focus of today’s lesson is to see God’s compassionate provision.

Today’s narrative is part of what is known as the Ancestral narratives in the Old Testament. From Genesis 12 through 45, we read of the patriarchs (and matriarchs) who gave birth to the line of the Israelites. We read of the importance of God’s covenant through this family and God’s promises made to these chosen people.

The primary patriarch in the book of Genesis is Abraham, who is initially introduced as Abram with his name being changed when God makes a covenant with him. During the midst of Abraham and Sarah waiting on a child to continue their line, Sarah gives Abraham her slave-girl Hagar to conceive a child. This episode begins a series of conflicts as when Sarah gives birth to her own child, there is the question of who will carry the blessing.

The episode reaches a climax in today’s scripture when Sarah sees Ishmael playing with Isaac, her son. She will not have it and orders both the handmaid and the child to leave. Abraham is distressed for good reason. Ishmael is his son, not adopted, but born to a man of promise who is not ready to relinquish the realities of primogeniture.<sup>1</sup> God tells Abraham to do as Sarah asks and God will take care of the rest.

In a tender scene, Hagar and Ishmael go into the desert with a flask of water and food for the journey. Yet these provisions run out and Hagar leaves her son in the brush to go and cry, a mother who will not watch her child die in front of her. Her tears and crying are met by an angel who cries out to her. The message God gives to Abraham is repeated and Hagar is told of how Ishmael will go on to be the ancestor of a great nation. Then God opens her eyes through the tears, and she sees a well for the water flask to be filled. The child is given something to drink, and they move on.

The text tells us how God is with the boy and he grows up to be an expert with the bow, catching game and learning to live from the land. He lives in the wilderness and his mother procures a wife for him, continuing his story. The rest of the Genesis narratives continue to focus on Abraham’s descendants through the line of Isaac.

Genesis is all about beginnings and origin stories. The narrative today focuses on how God’s freedom is not limited by barrenness, old age, or primogeniture as God alone has the

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, “Genesis,” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2010), 183.

power to make new.<sup>2</sup> God will provide and God will not abandon.

### **Application**

Whenever people talk about the Bible and family values, I always wonder if they've ever done a deep dive into the book of Genesis. As I read this book in both personal study and when teaching or preaching, my eyes sometimes grow wide at the relationships of the ancestors of the faith and what occurs in them. Today is no exception as we read of the patriarch of faith between an escalating conflict of his wife and his wife's handmaid, both of whom have given births to his sons. Talk about some awkward family conversations!

Yet in a story of what seems like tragedy and miscommunication, God seeks to provide for the vulnerable and demonstrates compassion for those who are cast aside. The chief acting agent in the narrative today is God, the one who sees past all the complicated human dynamics and acts to provide for those in need. In this case, God sends water and promises to make this oldest son into a nation and remind the mother of how God indeed hears her cries.

As we read this story, I am struck by how often we look to the other narratives of Genesis which feel more reassuring or dynamic. We love reading of Abraham and Sarah finally receiving a child. We can gush over the marriage of Isaac and Rebekah with the meeting at the well. There is celebration for Joseph when he forgives his brothers in Egypt and prepares a home for them during a famine.

Yet in this case, we see God acting on behalf of a slave woman and her child. There is both the illumination of the well and the promise of making the child into a great nation. God cares for those in need and shows them there are the things they need in front of them. God also promises to be with them going forward even as they stand in the wilderness.

This is the kind of Genesis narrative I think we need more of as we hear of God looking out for those most in need. At some point in our lives, we too might find ourselves like Hagar or Ishmael, standing in the wilderness with nothing to refuel or replenish us. We might cry out to God asking for an answer, believing there is no way to move forward or no path to follow.

And this is when God can ask us to open our eyes and to see how God provides for us right when we need it. The thing we needed the most is right there in front of us and the prayer moves from a cry of pain to a place of thanksgiving. God's compassion comes out and we are reminded of how there is a living God who does not forsake or abandon us.

A few weeks we were leading a discussion on the spiritual discipline of prayer, and we discussed how our prayers for certain things are sometimes answered in unusual ways. At times we would eventually find the answer to the prayer was right there in front of us or we would be surprised by how the prayer changed. God would provide and yet not in the way we suspected.

I have often come to find in some of the dilemmas I have faced of how answers or the people I needed were right there in front of me. When it comes to God's compassion, I often think of how the Lord sends us people like the angel in the text who remind us of how God is with us. These people can often help us know more about ourselves and can also tell us where the well in our life can be refilled with the living water of God. They emphasize how God is on our side and much like Hagar and Ishmael, God is there to provide and make promises unto us.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 185.

As this narrative in Genesis and the other books of the Bible tell us, God is on the side of the oppressed and the cast aside. When it seems the world or those in power have casts others aside, it is the Lord God who opens the eyes of all to show how God is always for those discounted or shut out. God is the one who will open the eyes of all and show how God provides.

How have you experienced God's compassion? Why do you think God provides for the vulnerable? Have you ever felt God open your eyes in the wilderness? What are moments you felt God answered your prayers in unusual ways? Who are people who have acted like God's messengers in your life?

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