

Genesis 16:10–17:9 — Hagar at the Well, Ishmael's Character, and El Shaddai

Bible Study · Genesis 16–17

The Angel's Word to Hagar — Mercy Without Saving Grace

Genesis 16:10–12 records the angel of Jehovah's message to Hagar: I will multiply thy seed exceedingly, that it shall not be numbered for multitude. A son would be born, to be called Ishmael — God hears — because the Lord had heard her affliction. At that moment, by any earthly reckoning, Hagar had everything and Sarah had nothing: Hagar was with child and Sarah's count was zero. But that is not how God reckons. He looks from eternity. He desires to bless His people at their latter end, and the temporary score is not the final one.

This blessing on Hagar and Ishmael was a mercy — not the same as saving grace. It is worth distinguishing them. Mercy has regard to a person's need; grace is God acting from Himself to bring a soul into personal relationship with Himself. God can show mercy to persons not taken into relationship by grace. In Romans, where Paul speaks of God showing mercy on whom He will show mercy, the reference is to the golden calf episode — God showed mercy on Israel there, but that did not save every Israelite. So here: God's blessing on Ishmael's line was real, and his name means God hears. But a blessing on the Ishmaelite line does not make Ishmaelites into the seed of promise.

The lesson for us is important: outward blessing and prosperity must not be taken as the mark of the true seed of promise. At the moment, unnumbered multitudes were promised to Hagar and zero to Sarah. But the story had not ended. To look at the temporary condition and draw final conclusions from it is to walk by sight, not by faith.

Beerlahairoi — The Well of the Living One Who Was Seen

In verse 13, Hagar named the Lord who spoke to her: Thou God seest me — El Roi. And the well was called Beerlahairoi. Beer means well. The rest of the name has to do with seeing or being seen — the well of the living one who was seen, as JND's marginal note gives it. The King James margin has it as the well of him that liveth and seeth me. JND's rendering is notably different and deeper: this is not the well where I was seen, but the well where the living one was seen, because God revealed Himself there.

This makes Hagar's going back the more solemn. She had been to the place where God revealed Himself. She had heard His voice, received His mercy, been given a new direction. And yet there is no continuance with the living one whom she saw. She went back to her mistress, as directed — she submitted, which was the right thing to do. But no continuance with God is recorded.

The well becomes the resting place of Isaac later. In Genesis 24, Isaac came from the way of the well Lahai Roi and meditated in the field at eventide. In Genesis 25:11, after Abraham's death, it says Isaac dwelt by the well Lahai Roi. It was not a passing visit for him. The place where God revealed Himself was where he stayed. What a contrast: Hagar visited and left; Isaac meditated and dwelt.

Ishmael's Character — Wild, Not Free

Verse 12 describes Ishmael as a wild ass of a man: his hand will be against every man, and every man's hand against him. The Galatian epistle makes direct use of this in chapter 4:29: as then he that was born according to flesh persecuted him that was born according to Spirit, so also it is now. The characterisation of Ishmael as born according to flesh is the scriptural shorthand for his entire life. He owed his existence to a natural expedient taken apart from the will of God, and he never rose above it. A moral stream never rises above its source.

It is vital to distinguish wildness from liberty. These two things are easily confused — the notion that doing whatever one wants is freedom. But Ishmael's wildness produced not companionship but conflict: his hand against every man, and every man's hand against him. We do not read of Ishmael's friends. We do not read of Ishmael enjoying fellowship with God or with man. True liberty is doing the will of God. The flesh mistakes wildness for liberty and produces isolation instead.

Submission to the will of God and to His word is the foundation for true Christian fellowship. The Ishmael character is in all of us as the first man; when it is not judged it produces exactly the behaviour seen here. The dispensational lesson and the moral lesson are inseparable in this passage: Hagar represents law, Sarah represents grace; Ishmael represents the first man disclosed by the law, Isaac the second man brought forth by sovereign promise. Both lessons run in the same text at the same time.

Sarah and Abraham did something they should not have done, and they had to live with the consequences for nineteen years — until Ishmael and Hagar were finally cast out at the time of weaning.

Thirteen Years and El Shaddai — Walking Before the Almighty

From the birth of Ishmael to the opening of Genesis 17, thirteen years passed in silence. When Abraham was 86, Hagar bore Ishmael; when he was 99, God appeared to him again. During those thirteen years Abraham had been observing nature in decline. Earlier, the scheme with Hagar had been proposed because Abraham was still naturally capable of fathering children — only Sarah could not conceive. God allowed thirteen years to pass until both of them were past the point where any natural solution could be proposed. Now it was not a partial problem with one side of nature failing — it was complete. As Romans 4 says of Isaac, Abraham's body was now as good as dead. The total helplessness of nature had to be demonstrated so that when the son of promise came, there could be no

confusion about who produced him.

Into that complete impossibility came the revelation of a new name: I am El Shaddai — the Almighty God, or literally, the God of powers. JND's marginal note gives Shaddai as the plural of the word for power. God powers. He is the one who can meet every exigency, solve every problem, handle every impossibility. And the call to Abraham was: walk before me, and be thou perfect — walk in the full consistency of what this name means. Let your life be shaped by the knowledge that you are before El Shaddai, the all-powerful one.

Romans 4:21 captures the response this name demands: being fully persuaded that what he had promised, he was also able to perform. That is Shaddai: He is able. Abraham, confronted with what was beyond all nature, believed God, and it was counted to him for righteousness. His faith did not rest on circumstances or possibilities; it rested on the name of the one who had promised. The God of forces that the Antichrist shall worship is a counterfeit of this. El Shaddai is the God of powers — the real thing.