

Can God Open your Eyes?

Sunday School Lesson

Genesis 21:9-21; Genesis 16

October 1, 2023

Twitter is a social media post site where many people enjoy arguing politics and religion. It is not as interesting as it once was since Elon Musk bought the company and has run many participants off with threats and rumors. Occasionally, you still see an observation that tells those of us over sixty how much American Christianity has changed since our children. Recently, a Christian pastor I follow wrote a post about growing up in an evangelical church and the takeaways he still remembers. It sounded a lot like my home church. There was an emphasis on the Bible (check), there was an emphasis on spreading the gospel to all people (check), there was an emphasis on the common good, both of the body of Christ and the whole community in which they lived and worked (check), and finally, the importance of growing up in a nation where people are free to worship God as they choose (check). He suddenly was being attacked that the only religion that should have the freedom to worship is Christianity. I was more than a little surprised. Those criticizing the statement felt that Christians were special, Christians were chosen, and that Christians should have privileges that others do not have. I wonder what they would think about God's actions in this story. Many find the story of Hagar to be one of the most disturbing stories in the Bible and yet, we know the actions in the story have been repeated over and over throughout history

Let us pray

O Holy God,

Thank you for leading us through another week. Open our hearts to hear your word so we may be faithful disciples who are known by our love for one another and our neighbors. Amen.

Our Purpose Statement:

To see God's compassionate provision for us.

Background: If you read Genesis 16, you will get some background for this story. Sarah and Abraham had been unable to have children and they were well past child-bearing age. They moved to Canaan because God promised them a child and without God, there would be no child. They had now been in Canaan ten years with still no child so Sarah decided to take matters into her own hands and send her slave, Hagar, into Abraham so Hagar could bear a child for Abram. That would be illegal today but it was fairly common back then. When Hagar got pregnant, Sarah turned jealous but what was worse is that Sarah blamed her jealousy on Hagar. Since she was Sarah's slave, Abraham turned a blind eye to Sarah's abuse. Many years later, Sarah gets pregnant and bears a son, Isaac. At Isaac's weaning party, Hagar's son, Ishmael, was playing with Isaac and Sarah realized that Ishmael is the oldest son and she wanted him and his mother banished.

Read: Genesis 21:9-21

What does it mean to be chosen? God chose and called Abraham and Sarah but it took a very long time for Abraham to understand that calling. To be specific, Abraham was 75 years old and Sarah was 65 when they were called. God promised them a child and that did not happen until Abraham was 100 and Sarah was 90. By that time, Abraham had begun to understand that being chosen was not a privilege but a responsibility. I am not sure Sarah ever understood.

Neglecting the Responsibility to Others

Sarah created the problem of Hagar and Ishmael and when she wanted them banished, Abraham had a problem because he loved both Ishmael and Isaac. God promised Abraham that even though Ishmael was not the chosen one, Ishmael would still be blessed. So Abraham packed up Hagar and Ishmael, gave them minimal provisions, then abandoned them. We could sugarcoat it and say that Abraham and Sarah left Hagar and Ishmael in God's hands but sending them out into the wilderness with little provisions is cruel to me. Hagar was too distraught to see any future but death for her and her son. When the water ran out, she placed her son in the shade then walked away to what she presumed to be her own death when God intervenes. Where once she saw no hope, God helped her to see an oasis in the desert. God helped her find water, find hope, and find life. We are not told of the conversations taking place back in Abraham's camp.

My Rabbi Hebrew teacher in seminary often talked about the sacrifice God made for Israel and how she sees that burden as their responsibility towards the care of others. God did not love Sarah more than Hagar. God did not love the Hebrews more than the Egyptians, or the Romans, or the Gentiles. Chosen meant you accepted a responsibility, not a privilege, to consider yourself superior to others. The Hebrew people will forever be God's chosen people but that has often led more to abuse than privilege.

We as Christians are also chosen but that does not come with the privilege of ignoring or refusing to serve others. Some Christians believe slavery was okay because they were better than the slaves. Wrong. When God opens our eyes to see truth, we should move in that direction. Some Christians teach that slavery was good because it brought slaves to Christ. Wrong again. Christianity was alive in Africa long before the slave trade began. Many of our early Christian leaders were from Ethiopia and Egypt. The call to follow Christ is the call to serve others and to think of others as better than ourselves.

Ishmael does not hold this slight from Sarah against her son, Isaac. Ishmael returns to help Isaac bury their father, Abraham. God blesses Ishmael with many children. Jesus tells us to think of others better than ourselves. Prejudice is not acceptable for the people who call themselves followers of Jesus.

Closing Prayer - O God, touch our hearts and heal our fears. Heal our hurts and forgive us. Shower us with your grace so we may live in that grace and others will see you in us. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.