



Prayer Study 2: Hagar's 'Prayers'

Background

In Scripture we find many examples of prayer. One of the simplest definitions of prayer is dialogue or conversation with God, noting that conversation involves both talking and listening. And so we include in our series of studies on prayer the story of Hagar, and her encounter with an Angel of the Lord. In later studies we will cover other definitions of prayer.

Hagar was an Egyptian bondservant in Abram's household, a handmaid to Sarai; Abram probably acquired her during his visit to Egypt. With the passing years Abram felt keenly the lack of a son and heir, and, after the war of the kings (Genesis 14), with magnificent faith believed God's promise that he would indeed have a son (Genesis 15: 2-6). The text reveals many tensions, and the relationship between Abram and Sarai is no exception. Being a childless couple must have been very difficult for both Sarai and Abram, however although God promises Abram descendants and an heir it is never clear how much Sarai knows about these promises. This is important to remember because Sarai appears to have power over Hagar in the text but Sarai herself is still powerless within the cultural situation. Many of the tensions that happen between Hagar and Sarah stem from a relationship between Abram, Sarai and God that is not yet right. According to the customary law of the period the childless Sarai urged Abram to have a son by her servant Hagar - so Ishmael (meaning: God hears and attends to a plea or affliction) was born, the son of a slave- woman (Genesis 16).

Noting that Hagar is never addressed by her name is important. The name is given, but not used. Hagar runs away and encounters God. God calls her by her name! Already we see a difference in the text between society and God. The text IS aware. In the patriarchal society, Abraham and Sarah would not have called Hagar by her name. It is incredible that the text draws out this subtle fact.

Study 2a

Genesis 16: 1-15

- 1 Why does Hagar run away from Sarai and Abram?
- 2 Where does God find Hagar?
- 3 What is the first thing the "Angel of the Lord" does when he finds Hagar?
- 4 What does the "Angel of the Lord" tell Hagar to do, and what will be her reward?



- 5 What is significant about the promise that the “Angel of the Lord” gives to Hagar, in particular the meaning of Ishmael's name?
- 6 What is significant about Hagar’s reply to the “Angel of the Lord”?
- 7 What can we learn from Hagar’s response that we could use in our own life?

Study 2b

After Hagar’s return to Abram and Sarai, it is a few chapters before we hear of Hagar again. However, when we do return to Hagar’s story in chapter 21, a lot has clearly been happening, especially to Abram and Sarai. For a start God has made His covenant with Abram of circumcision and changed both of their names with the addition of an ‘honorific’ ‘h’, so that Abram is now Abraham (meaning: seen the back of (God)) and Sarai is now Sarah (meaning Princess). They also have a son, Isaac (meaning: laughter) whose birth we read of in chapter 21. It at this point that we return to Hagar’s story, with the weaning feast for Isaac. Isaac and Ishmael are happily playing together.

Genesis 21: 8-20

- 1 Why does Hagar have to leave the house of Sarah and Abraham?
- 2 Why is Abraham initially upset at the thought of Hagar and Ishmael leaving? How does he treat them?
- 3 Where does Hagar go?
- 4 Where is Hagar and what is she doing when God finds her and Ishmael?
- 5 Why does God respond to Hagar?
- 6 What does God tell Hagar to do and what does God himself do?
- 7 What action does Hagar take as a consequence of what God has done?
- 8 What happens to Ishmael when he grows up, do you think that there is anything significant about his profession and choice of wife?
- 9 Why do you think God promised to make Ishmael “*into a great nation*”?



10 What can we learn from our studies on Hagar's story?