

# The God Who Sees

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] we look through it together. I think one of the things that the Bible helps us to see, and not only see, but start to understand, is the huge gulf we have between the world that we want and the world that we have. Our idea of how things should be, and yet our experience, our recognition of how things so often are. I think particularly the book of Genesis lays that out for us, and we see that in this chapter, Genesis chapter 6, the first scene are kind of two scenes in this chapter. In one scene, the first scene, it really paints a kind of an ugly picture. No one is behaving well here. There is division, there is strife, there is pain. The second half of the chapter then, we get this second scene, and here we're going to see a really kind of beautiful and a really tender picture in the second half of this chapter. I think one of the things this chapter is asking us, or inviting us to ask, is the question, well, which world do we want to be in? How do we want the world to work? Often our world probably looks more like scene one, when really we're kind of after scene two. Well, how do we get there? And we're going to see really the answer to that question is that we need to bring God into the picture, because while humanity and what is wrong with humanity is the source of the pain that we so often see around us, it is God who is the source of what is good, and it is God that brings that healing that we and our world need.

So let's get straight into these kind of two contrasting scenes and what it is that they show us about ourselves and about God. First then is scene one, and I've called this a lack of faith and its ugly consequences. A lack of faith and its ugly consequences. Our whole overall kind of heading for this series, through the life of Abraham, is living by faith in the promises of God. And in some ways, that's the question that we keep coming up against at every point in Abraham and his family's life. Will they act in faith? Will they trust in God's promises?

Or will they lack faith and seek to take matters into their own hands? We've seen examples of both so far already. And here in chapter 16, we're very much in the second category, a lack of faith and its ugly consequences. Verse 1, we're reminded again of the situation. Abraham has been promised great offspring. He would be father of a great nation. And yet Sarah, his wife, has not had any children. And we see here how she holds this against God. She says, behold now, the Lord has prevented me from bearing children. And so she takes matters into her own hands. She comes up with her own plan, says to her husband, go into my servant, sleep with my servant. It may be that I shall obtain children by her. Sarah's plan is for Abraham to sleep with her servant, Hagar. And then she, Sarah, will kind of claim a child as their own, as this much needed offspring that her and Abraham have to have. And straight away, I think, I hope as we're reading this, this whole thing sounds not on, would be a kind of a generous term, to say the least. You know, we wince as we hear this plan. And we are right to do so.

This chapter is really deliberate to present this in a negative light, just in case we hadn't picked up on it not being a good idea anyway. We don't actually have time to go into all the details.

But there's lots of really deliberate links between the start of Genesis chapter 16 and back into Genesis chapter 3. That is the fall. That is Adam and Eve taking the fruits in the garden, the entrance of sin into the world. There's deliberate links in terms of the themes. There's deliberate links in terms of the words used. There's deliberate links in terms of the order of the words used to link us back to that other time of lack of faith and of failure of humanity to trust in God.

[ 4 : 32 ] This chapter, just like Genesis chapter 3, is the refusal to trust in God's promises being worked out as humanity thinks they know best, because ultimately they don't trust. They don't have faith that God is going to do what God has said and what God has promised he will do. And so what are the consequences of that that we see in these verses? Well, as we said, it's just this incredibly ugly scene.

Even the concept, as we said, is wrong. The idea of this female slave being kind of used as property, handed about, it's horrific. And actually a repeated pattern through the Old Testament, through the Bible, wherever we see people with multiple wives, sometimes that's not explicitly condemned. But wherever the Bible describes polygamy or whatever it is, it's outside of the original Genesis pattern of one man and one wife. It shows us the ugly consequences of that.

And here we see the consequences of this lack of faith and this abandoning God's plan. We see the complete breakdown of relationships in verses 4 to 6 as nobody reacts well in this situation. Hagar so clearly is mistreated. But on becoming pregnant, verse 4, she looked with contempt upon her mistress.

She looks down on Sarah, the kind of the cruelty there of mocking her for being unable to have a child of her own. Sarah then goes to Abraham. Verse 5, she blames him for all of this.

May the wrong done to me be on you. Abraham, the head of the household, then completely kind of backs away, doesn't he? Do to her as you please, is his response. He was happy to be involved in this process when it meant sleeping with this girl. But now that there are consequences of that, coming home to roost, he takes no responsibility for protecting her. Abraham is as much to blame as anyone else in this scenario. And then finally, the end of verse 6, then Sarai dealt harshly with her. That's with Hagar. And she fled from her. That harsh word there, harshly, is an incredibly strong word. It's actually the same word that will be used of how the Egyptian slave masters treated the Israelite slaves at the start of the book of Exodus. So this is a really kind of sinful, strong mistreatment.

[ 7 : 12 ] And the end of scene 1 is Hagar pregnant, but fleeing from Sarai back toward her homeland of Egypt. So all of that to say, as we look through this chapter, the first thing we see, scene 1, this is a mess.

This is an ugly scene with everyone behaving badly. People sinning and people being sinned against. It is humanity at its worst. And what we want to see is that it all traces back.

It all traces back at its root to that lack of faith in God's promises. And of humans trying to take God's role on themselves.

So that's what we see really clearly, verses 1 to 6, scene 1, a lack of faith and its ugly consequences. What does that mean for us? Well, I think it's that warning of the same danger, isn't it?

The danger of failing to trust God. The danger of failing to take God at his word. And instead thinking that we know better. That we know what will work.

[ 8 : 17 ] That we can provide the answers for ourselves. That we need to do God's job for him. I suppose on the biggest scale, that means failing to trust in God's promises for salvation.

These promises, as we've seen in previous weeks, that begin right here in Genesis. These promises where the foundation is laid out to Abraham back in chapter 12, but that ultimately run right through the Bible.

Tie the whole thing together and point us to Jesus and the gospel. The fulfillment of God blessing the nations. God's promised that because Jesus died, we can be forgiven.

We can be made his people if we simply trust in him and what he has done for us. That justification by faith alone that we spoke about last week.

And yet it's so easy for us to doubt that promise. And it's so easy for us to doubt that faith is enough. We doubt that God will do as he said.

[ 9 : 18 ] And so we try and kind of manufacture a different way for us to be saved. A different way to be made right with God. We take matters into our own hands, as Sarai did.

And inevitably, the result of that is some sort of works-based religion. It's the kind of thing where we earn our salvation. We earn our place with God, rather than receiving it as a gift through faith.

It's the kind of thing where we say, well, if I'm good enough, well, then God has to accept me. We don't really trust him, but we make it almost so that we feel God doesn't have a choice.

He has to do us good. And yet there are really ugly consequences which come with that. Firstly, first and foremost, that is not what the Bible teaches. That is not what God promises.

And so it simply doesn't work. We can't be made right with God. The gap between us and God is far too vast for us to cross through our own efforts.

[ 10 : 19 ] And yet in trying to do it that way, do it our way, we really end up with these inevitable consequences, either of pride or of despair. Either the pride that comes from saying, I am so good that God must love me.

I'm so much better than these people around me that I must be one of God's special people. That was what the Pharisees in the New Testament thought. We keep the rules, so God has to love us.

And Jesus had absolutely no time for that attitude. And that is one of the biggest problems for people with the church, so often looking in from the outside, thinking that the church is arrogant.

Maybe having experienced that in the past, thinking that Christians think they are better than other people. It's an incredibly ugly attitude that rightly puts people off, because that is not the message of the Bible.

And actually that pride comes when people refuse to have faith in God's promises, and instead try and take matters in their own hands, thinking he'll earn their favor.

[ 11 : 25 ] The refusal to have faith ends up either with that pride or the other consequence being despair. We refuse to be accepted simply by having faith.

We think we have to do something. And yet in some ways this is a more realistic assessment of the situation. We quickly realize that we can't reach that standard, and so we give up.

We despair. We lose hope. Religion becomes a kind of an oppressive, a harsh thing that asks more of us than we're able to give. And so we fear it.

Again, ugly consequences, because we fail to trust God's promise that he will provide a rescue through faith in him, that he has done that for us through Jesus.

And that's one way that our lack of faith leads to these ugly consequences. We see it worked out in other ways as well. Will we have faith in how God calls us to live, not just in terms of salvation, but in terms of the day-to-day aspects of life?

[ 12 : 33 ] You know, God promises that he alone offers us true rest. That in Jesus alone is found satisfaction and life to the full. That living according to his word is never the easiest way to live.

We're not promised that. But we are promised it is what will bring us ultimate security and joy. And yet again, it's so easy for us to fail to trust that promise.

For example, we think that money is where we'll find real security and happiness. Our world tells us that financial security is true security. And so we end up with this world of vast financial inequality where everyone kind of grabs for more and more as much as they can get and holds onto it as tightly as they can, and yet never has enough or is never satisfied.

Where those who do have it have to kind of flaunt it in almost grotesque ways, and those who don't have it are kind of pushed to the side as not really worth much.

We fail to believe the security that God offers, and we see the ugly consequences in the world around us. Or we fail to believe that in terms of relationships. That's a topic right at the heart of this passage.

[ 13 : 49 ] We think that we have to be with someone to be worth something. And either people despair if they're not, or people feel pressured into things which aren't right, and that leaves that trail of pain and hurt behind them.

Or Christians opt for relationships with people who aren't Christians, because ultimately we don't quite believe that a relationship with Jesus is enough.

We listen to our culture that says we need someone, and yet again, either the relational pain, or most significantly, the damage that that human relationship can do to their spiritual relationship as they pull in different directions, being founded on different foundations.

As we look around the world, we look in our communities, but also as we look in our own lives, we are confronted by the ugliness and the pain that we so often see.

That these broken relationships, this hostility that we see in verses 1 to 6, are far closer to home than we might like to think. We see it on personal, individual scales.

[ 14 : 57 ] We see it on worldwide scales on the news. And ultimately, the Bible says, and it says that here, if we want a reason for that, why the world is as it is, it is that it ultimately traces back to a lack of faith in God and his promises.

And we could say that our problems and the world problems ultimately come back to that single issue. So there's scene 1. As we said, it's an ugly picture.

It is more evidence for the file that proves that Abraham is not chosen because of his goodness. Today, Abraham would have been cancelled long ago with all these kind of skeletons in his closet, all this bad behaviour in his past.

But the Bible is happy to keep those in, and even to kind of shine a light on those things. Because in the Bible, God is always the hero. And that's what we see in the second half of this passage.

And the contrast here, I hope, couldn't be more clearer. Scene 1, a lack of faith and its ugly consequences. But scene 2, it is God's care for the powerless and outcast.

[ 16 : 06 ] God's care for the powerless and outcast. Scene 1 finishes with Hagar fleeing Sarai. Scene 2 begins with the angel of the Lord, with God himself finding Hagar.

Scene 1, we have Hagar essentially treated as property, treated harshly, with no one standing up for her. Scene 2, the very first words spoken, she is addressed by name.

Fascinating. This is the only known instance, not just in the Bible, but in all of ancient Near Eastern literature, where a deity, where God himself addresses a woman by name.

The difference in care, in compassion, in respect, in love between these two scenes is so striking. And God speaks to Hagar.

And in some ways, at first, it might seem like a harsh message. Verse 9, And the angel of the Lord said to her, Return to your mistress and submit to her. Basically, go back to the one that you are fleeing from.

[ 17 : 18 ] But Hagar is able to go back with this promise, from verse 10 onwards, that God will multiply her offspring, that she will have a son, that he's to be called Ishmael.

It means God hears, because God has heard, and God has listened to the suffering that she has gone through. Now, this isn't the son.

If we think of the big picture of the Bible we've kept coming back to, this is not the son through whom God will keep his covenant promise to Abraham. This is not the son through whom the nations will be blessed.

Instead, verse 12, He shall be a wild donkey of a man. I wouldn't recommend saying that to a pregnant woman unless you're God. But we then go on and see there will be strife between him and others.

This is not the line of blessing. And actually, we see that played out in the rest of the Bible. But even though this is not that line of promise, you know, if this was a computer game, this would be a kind of a side quest.

[ 18 : 19 ] You don't actually have to complete to finish the whole game. But even here, on this kind of side quest to this powerless and outcast woman, we see God's care and compassion.

And Hagar experiences this care. She calls the Lord a God of seeing. One author explains that in Scripture, when God sees, he cares.

Hagar goes on to say, truly here I have seen him who looks after me. It's literally, I have seen him who sees me. God's care for the powerless and the outcast.

And that means not that Hagar's life is easy. It doesn't undo the hurt and the hardship that she has been through. But we do see God's presence with her.

And his blessing on her is at the end of this passage. It's Hagar who is kind of front and center. While Sarai, who began this passage with all her schemes, and with all the power, and with all the influences, nowhere to be seen.

[ 19 : 23 ] But verses 15 and 16, and Hagar bore Abraham a son. And Abraham called the name of his son, whom Hagar bore Ishmael. Abraham was 86 years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abraham.

And when we fail to trust in God, when we think we've got to take matters into our own hands, when we think that God won't pull through, and we have to do his job for him, we end up, as we've seen in all sorts of mess, but we see here that when we recognize our helplessness, when we recognize that actually we are not God, when we recognize actually it's not our job to manipulate things or other people to try and get our own way, when we grasp and accept our helplessness, we see that God really does care.

We see that God really will pull through. Now these two scenes give us such a contrast, don't they, between humanity's attitude to one another apart from God, humanity's self-seeking nature, and God's love and care on the other hand.

And I think that's kind of deliberately put back to back like this as well, you know, to help us see why wouldn't we trust this God? Why wouldn't we want to put ourselves in the hands of this God who shows care for the powerless and the outcast?

This passage is here to encourage us, to help us to have that faith. It's really easy, isn't it, to be down on Sarah and Abraham in this passage.

[ 20 : 59 ] Why didn't they just believe? Why didn't they have faith? Why did they do this stupid, this awful thing? And yet that's easier said than done, isn't it? This passage has time markers at the start and the end.

Have a look at verse three. It says they'd been in Canaan 10 years. 10 years since chapter 13, even longer since the promises of chapter 12. What were you doing 10 years ago?

That's a long time. How would you feel waiting all that time for God to keep a promise? Or verse 16, Abraham was 86 years old when Hagar bore Ishmael.

You know, are we surprised that Sarah thinks she needs to kind of put her foot on the accelerator a little bit and get things moving? It would be really easy to say they should just have had faith.

And yet that's hard. It would be really easy for this series in Abraham to simply be us kind of banging ourselves over the head each week, saying, you need to have faith. You need to stop doubting. You need to trust God.

[ 22 : 01 ] And we do. And yet it's hard, isn't it, to have faith for the long term. Perhaps for some people in that room, that's how it feels. That you've been waiting for a long time.

Or things have been difficult for a long time. Or it's been hard to make sense of what God has been doing for a long time. Or it's been a challenging walk of obedience for a long time.

So many of the Psalms speak of waiting for God. We sang earlier from Psalm 130, I wait, my soul waits for the Lord. My hope is in his word.

But it is hard to keep on trusting and to keep on waiting, isn't it? And yet this passage gives us the reassurance to keep on hoping in God.

Even as things get tough. Even over the long haul. Even when we don't know why things are happening. Because this is the kind of God that he is. The God who cares for the powerless and the outcast.

[ 23 : 02 ] The God who cares for those who are mistreated and downtrodden by others. The God who cares for those who have been hurt by our world and spat out the other end.

The God who cares for those who have lost faith and hope in anything else. We don't always know what God is doing. We're not always told. We're not told that he'll always reveal that the fullness of his plans to us.

But we can know what God is like. And that even though we don't see the end from the beginning, he is doing us good. He will keep his promises to bless us.

And again, we see that most fully. And most finally in the person and work of Jesus where this whole Abraham story is leading to. Jesus shows us in history that God does fulfill his plan of salvation.

He promises Abraham right back in chapter 12. He did provide, as we saw last week, a people and a place, the church, and our eternal home with God in the new creation.

[ 24 : 06 ] Abraham's offspring was this blessing to the nations. That offspring was Jesus Christ, that blessing, the forgiveness he offers. But Jesus is also the fullest demonstration of what we see here in scene two, that God cares for the powerless and the outcasts because that is who Jesus spent his life with.

That's who Jesus showed love and respect to when no one else did. Jesus said that he came for those who knew their need, not those who thought they could sort things out for themselves.

That he came not for those who thought they were well, but for those who knew they were sick. And he showed the depth of that love by going to the cross in our place.

God's care for the outcasts and the powerless, God's care for us, is shown in that he provided the rescue that we need. And that is what is to keep us trusting in him even when things are hard.

We look to Jesus, we look to the cross to keep on walking in faith even for the long haul. We live by faith even when we don't know what God is doing. And we don't always know why he's doing it.

[ 25 : 22 ] But in the gospel, we see that he has fulfilled that plan of rescue that he promised so we can trust and depend on him fully every step of the way.

And it's as we do that, it's as we rest in him that we're able to turn away from the attitudes of scene one of verses one to six where we're using others for our own means.

And they're kind of the ugly consequences of that. Instead, we're free to see people as God sees them. We can show care and compassion as we recognize God has shown that to us.

We can do that securing God's love and the fulfillment of his promises to us. We asked at the start, what kind of world do we want to live in? We want a world of loving relationships.

We want a world of care and compassion. We want a world where we are people of real kindness. We want that in our church.

[ 26 : 24 ] And we want that to spread out, to overflow into our community. It only happens, this chapter tells us, it only happens as we bring God into the picture.

As we look to what God has done in the gospel through Jesus. As we see the care and compassion he has shown us who are poor and needy. And having seen that, we continue to live in faith in his promises.

Knowing he will never let us down. Let's join together in prayer. Let's pray.