

Encountering God

By
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“And the LORD visited Sarah as He had said, and the LORD did for Sarah as He had spoken. For Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the set time of which God had spoken to him. And Abraham called the name of his son who was born to him—whom Sarah bore to him—Isaac. Then Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. Now Abraham was one hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. And Sarah said, “God has made me laugh, and all who hear will laugh with me.” She also said, “Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? For I have borne him a son in his old age.”
-Genesis 21:1-7

The life of Abraham, just like all the lives of those who sincerely seek the face of God, is a series of peaks and valleys. In the previous chapter, Abraham has one of the biggest failures of his life. In the midst of his grief over the fate of Lot, Abraham wandered into the area of Gerar and repeated a terrible mistake from his past. In order to protect himself, he tells everyone in the land that Sarah is his sister instead of his wife. Because he did this, Sarah is brought into the harem of the local ruler, and if God had not intervened, the child of promise that Abraham and Sarah had been waiting decades to receive, would have been lost to them. However, God does intervene and He protects Sarah from being harmed.

Now in this chapter, we will see three distinct encounters with God that occur in the lives of Sarah, Hagar, and Abraham. Each encounter happens in very different circumstances, and each teaches us much about how we can encounter God during various stages of our life.

Encountering God in His Promises

“By faith Sarah herself also received strength to conceive seed, and she bore a child when she was past the age, because she judged Him faithful who had promised.”
-Hebrews 11:11

We start with Sarah, who receives the most positive encounter with God in the chapter. While the last chapter of Genesis showed Abraham commit one of his greatest follies, the insinuation is that Sarah had remained faithful to the promise of God even in the

mistakes of her husband. This is one of the reasons why Sarah is considered to be a great woman of faith. Even though the previous chapters of Genesis have shown Sarah making her own grievous mistakes, it seems that she has learned from her mistakes and is now walking in faithfulness to God. While Sarah's encounter with God is the one that most of us would like, encountering God in the form of answered prayer, simply getting what we want doesn't necessarily bring us near to God, oftentimes, the very opposite occurs.

Forgetting God in Prosperity

“Remove falsehood and lies far from me; Give me neither poverty nor riches— Feed me with the food allotted to me; Lest I be full and deny You, And say, “Who is the LORD?” Or lest I be poor and steal, And profane the name of my God.”

-Proverbs 30:8-9

Most of us, at some level, believe that if God were to answer all of our prayers, and all of our desires would be granted to us, this would result in extreme intimacy with the Lord, but the Bible teaches something quite different. The main message of the Bible about the heart of man is that our hearts are bent towards idolatry. This means that the main pull of our hearts is to enjoy the things of God apart from God Himself. This is why the apostle Paul writes this about the idolatrous nature of the human heart:

“Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves, who exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.”

-Romans 1:24-25

The idols of ancient man were nothing more than personifications of the supreme desires of the human heart. Look at any culture you want and you will find gods that represent wealth, sex, pleasure, power, and even more positive things like family and affection. Within all of these idols was the true heart of man. The desire to worship and serve the creature rather than the Creator. While we naturally like the things of God, true devotion to God and a desire to seek Him first is not something innate in the human soul. This is why Paul can boldly say just a few chapters later:

“There is none who understands; There is none who seeks after God. They have all turned aside; They have together become unprofitable; There is none who does good, no, not one.”

-Romans 3:11-12

This can seem like an overstatement, especially for a devout Jewish man like Paul, but in reality it is just an expression of reality. Since the fall, man has not pursued God as our supreme good, only as a source of the good that we really want. This was the criticism of Christ towards the religious elite of His day.

“But all their works they do to be seen by men. They make their phylacteries broad and enlarge the borders of their garments. “They love the best places at feasts, the best seats in the synagogues...”

-Matthew 23:5-6

From the outside, Pharisees like Paul would have looked like men who sincerely wanted God above all else, but Jesus here says that their motives were polluted. They didn't truly want God, they wanted attention and favors that a religious appearance afforded them. While I do believe these men were sincerely trying to solve the problem of their corruption, they were doing it the wrong way. Many religious people throughout the centuries have tried to solve the problem of idolatry by denying themselves pleasure in all forms.

These “ascetics” think that true religion is a denial of physical pleasure that they might enrich their souls. But Jesus shows us that this isn't the solution. Even the most devout men and women who had denied themselves large amounts of earthly pleasures in the name of religion still did this to be seen and receive praise from their fellow man. They tried to solve the problem of their hearts, but they tried to reform themselves from the outside in and ended up in a different form of idolatry. This is not to say that man is *only* corrupt, remember that every person still bears the image of our Creator and therefore can appreciate and even imitate godliness even if we don't know who God is. As Paul also says:

“...for when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things in the law, these, although not having the law, are a law to themselves, who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves their thoughts accusing or else excusing them).”

-Romans 2:14-15

Instead, what this teaches us is that the heart of man is *corrupted*, not that it is *only corrupt*. However, this corruption can be healed through a relationship with God. The only way for the human heart to actually discover its true desire in God and worship Him in Spirit and in truth is if we genuinely encounter Him. Through *knowing* God in a genuine relationship a person's heart can be reordered by God to place Him in the

appropriate place within our hearts. However, this isn't something that happens over night, this is a lifelong journey that God has placed us in.

Waiting on the Lord

“He gives power to the weak, And to those who have no might He increases strength. Even the youths shall faint and be weary, And the young men shall utterly fall, But those who wait on the LORD Shall renew their strength; They shall mount up with wings like eagles, They shall run and not be weary, They shall walk and not faint.”

-Isaiah 40:29-31

This concept helps us answer one of the most obvious questions that we can ask about God's relationship with Sarah, why did He make her wait so long? Some might argue that God made Sarah wait until she was past the age of child bearing so that she could see the power of God, but this still doesn't answer why God didn't allow her to get pregnant when they first entered the land of Canaan. From a certain perspective this would have benefitted Abraham and Sarah much more and would have allowed them to avoid many of their more blatant mistakes, including the error that they made with Hagar. However, God didn't do this, instead he made them wait until this specific moment to receive His promise, but why?

The reason goes back to what we have been talking about throughout this paper. Sure, God wanted to bless Sarah with a child of her own, but more than this, He wanted her to learn to trust Him and seek Him as her ultimate reward and blessing. God didn't want Abraham and Sarah to fall into idolatry with their son, which is a very easy thing for parents to do. Instead he wanted their child to truly live up to his name of Isaac (meaning laughter). God wanted the joy that Sarah had in Him to be the source of the joy that she had in her child.

Herein lies the cure to our idolatrous heart. It isn't in getting everything we want, but instead in being shown that God is all we need. Throughout the trials of her life, Sarah was able to witness time and time again God's supernatural protection over her. Even when her husband failed her, God stepped in to keep her safe and communicated to her time and time again His love and devotion to her. Over time, while she waited on the Lord, her faith and confidence in God grew and made her into the woman of faith that is extolled in Hebrews 11:11. We will see this concept more clearly in God's encounter with Hagar, but if we want the blessings of God to bring us closer to Him and not further away, we need to learn to wait faithfully on the Lord and trust in Him.

This process, no matter how trying it might be, will teach us this all important lesson. That God is not just a means to what we want, but He is the ultimate end of all our

desires. The person who understands this meets even trial with a deep contentment in God, and blessing through incredible thankfulness in God. For the person that doesn't understand this, even the incredible joy of prosperity will be short lived and trial will be unbearable. I think Augustine of Hippo expressed the difference between these two perspectives beautifully in his book "The City of God".

"Accordingly, two cities have been formed by two loves: the earthly by the love of self, even to the contempt of God; the heavenly by the love of God, even to the contempt of self. The former, in a word, glories in itself, the latter in the Lord. For the one seeks glory from men; but the greatest glory of the other is God, the witness of conscience. The one lifts up its head in its own glory; the other says to its God, "Thou art my glory, and the lifter up of mine head." In the one, the princes and the nations it subdues are ruled by the love of ruling; in the other, the princes and the subjects serve one another in love, the latter obeying, while the former take thought for all. The one delights in its own strength, represented in the persons of its rulers; the other says to its God, "I will love Thee, O Lord, my strength."

"...in the other city there is no human wisdom, but only godliness, which offers due worship to the true God, and looks for its reward in the society of the saints, of holy angels as well as holy men, "that God may be all in all."

-Augustine of Hippo - "The City of God"

Encountering God in the Wilderness

"So the child grew and was weaned. And Abraham made a great feast on the same day that Isaac was weaned. And Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, scoffing. Therefore she said to Abraham, "Cast out this bondwoman and her son; for the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son, namely with Isaac." And the matter was very displeasing in Abraham's sight because of his son. But God said to Abraham, "Do not let it be displeasing in your sight because of the lad or because of your bondwoman. Whatever Sarah has said to you, listen to her voice; for in Isaac your seed shall be called. "Yet I will also make a nation of the son of the bondwoman, because he is your seed." So Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water; and putting it on her shoulder, he gave it and the boy to Hagar, and sent her away. Then she departed and wandered in the Wilderness of Beersheba."

-Genesis 21:8-14

While it is wonderful to meditate on Sarah's story and see how God met her in her prosperity, God's encounters with Hagar and Abraham teach us more about how to get the heart of Sarah so that the blessings of God bring us thankfulness to Him, the giver

of every good and perfect gift, and not a heart of idolatry. At first glance, we can see Sarah's behavior here as a rehash of Genesis 16. In Genesis 16 Sarah became jealous of Hagar and abused her so badly that Hagar ran away. In this chapter, Sarah explicitly calls for Abraham to cast Hagar out of the home. This seems like Sarah is falling to the flesh again, and even Abraham seems to think so, but God confirms to Abraham that this isn't actually what is happening.

When God affirms Sarah's request we see that even though her request seemed harsh, it was in line with God's will. This doesn't mean that Sarah necessarily heard from God in this moment, only that her observations of Ishmael seemed to be correct. While we aren't given much information about what Ishmael did in this instance, there are two possible theories about what is meant by the word "scoffing" in the above passage. One theory is that Ishmael "scoffing" was actually a way of saying that he was engaging in pagan practices within the home.

While this might seem like a bit of a stretch, some commentators have noticed that the Hebrew word translated "scoffing" is the word "*ṣāḥaq*" which is the same word that Moses used to describe the pagan sexual rituals that the Israelites were performing before the golden calf in Exodus 32:6. Also remember that Ishmael in this chapter would have been a teenager and not a child and that Hagar was raised as a pagan in Egypt. So it is possible that Sarah saw Ishmael engaging in this behavior and didn't want the pagan practices of Hagar and Ishmael to pollute Isaac.

The other possibility is that this word was used to describe Ishmael's attitude towards Isaac. Up until this point, Abraham had been raising Ishmael as his sole heir. Now, not only would Ishmael have to share the inheritance with Isaac, but since Isaac was the child of promise, he knew that Isaac would actually get the inheritance of the firstborn and receive a double portion of his father's wealth and direct ownership of the land that Abraham possessed. This would understandably upset Ishmael and may have caused him to be resentful towards Isaac, maybe even murderously so. Whatever Sarah witnessed, the important thing is that God affirms her observation and tells Abraham to honor her request. While this act seems to almost kill Hagar and her son, we see in this chapter God's intent in this action:

Lessons in the Wilderness

"And the water in the skin was used up, and she placed the boy under one of the shrubs. Then she went and sat down across from him at a distance of about a bowshot; for she said to herself, "Let me not see the death of the boy." So she sat opposite him, and lifted her voice and wept. And God heard the voice of the lad. Then the angel of God called to Hagar out of heaven, and said to her, "What ails you, Hagar? Fear not, for

God has heard the voice of the lad where he is. "Arise, lift up the lad and hold him with your hand, for I will make him a great nation." Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water. And she went and filled the skin with water, and gave the lad a drink. So God was with the lad; and he grew and dwelt in the wilderness, and became an archer. He dwelt in the Wilderness of Paran; and his mother took a wife for him from the land of Egypt."

-Genesis 21:15-21

While this seems cruel, God had a specific intent in putting Hagar through this trial. This passage gives us some insight, but we receive even more insight when God does this same thing to the people of Israel in the book of Exodus, and especially when He does this to His own Son in the gospels. And when this happens to Jesus, Jesus expresses the specific lesson that God wanted to teach those who He sent into the wilderness. While the wilderness in these cases is literal, there are times when God sends His people into a "wilderness" season of their lives.

"O God, You are my God; early will I seek You; my soul thirsts for You; my flesh longs for You in a dry and thirsty land where there is no water."

-Psalm 63:1

The season in the "wilderness" is, symbolically, a time of deprivation in a persons' life. This is when we are "cut off" from the things in our life that give us direction and meaning and are cast into a harsh environment devoid of clear direction or sustenance. This loss can be as extreme as what happened to Hagar, but it can also be as common as losing a loved one, a career, your health, or your home. While times like this can be incredibly distressing, as stated before, there is a reason why God allows seasons like this in the lives of those who love Him.

Bread Alone

"And you shall remember that the LORD your God led you all the way these forty years in the wilderness, to humble you and test you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not. "So He humbled you, allowed you to hunger, and fed you with manna which you did not know nor did your fathers know, that He might make you know that man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the LORD."

-Deuteronomy 8:2-3

This is the passage that Jesus quotes to Satan when He goes through His own time in the wilderness. What this passage teaches us is that oftentimes God must send us into a time in the wilderness so that we can learn how important He is to us. As stated

before, our hearts naturally desire to make idols of the blessings of God. Because of this tendency, God uses the pain and suffering in our lives in order to show us this all important lesson. I think Corrie Ten Boom, (a woman who protected Jews during the Holocaust and was herself detained in a political concentration camp for giving aid to Jews), said it best:

“You may never know that Jesus is all you need, until Jesus is all you have.”

-Corrie ten Boom

Corrie was a devout Christian woman with a wonderful faith, but even she recognized the parts of her heart that were not completely given over to God. Through being stripped of everything that she had held dear, she truly learned what the Bible teaches, that God alone is all that we need and the end of all our desires. In a way, this famous quote of hers is a repetition of what the Apostle Paul when God refused to heal his own suffering:

“And He said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ’s sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”

-2 Corinthians 12:9-10

This is an unfortunate reality, but a reality nonetheless, the times when we are most ready to encounter God are the times when we have nothing else to cling to.

Meeting at the Well

“Now the Angel of the LORD found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, by the spring on the way to Shur.”

-Genesis 16:7

For this reason, meetings at springs and wells are a common theme throughout Scripture. We saw this back in Genesis 16 when Hagar encountered God at a spring, we see this in this chapter when Hagar is shown a well by God, Jacob meets his future wife Rachel at a well in Genesis 29, Moses meets his future wife in Exodus 2, and Jesus meets with a woman at a well in John 4. For ancient people, especially people groups who lived in the desert, wells had a lot of symbolic significance. They were places where the source of life, water, could be drawn from the depths up to the surface. This is why people give cosmic significance to wells and they make wishes on wells. Couple that with the fact that the main place of meeting in a village was the well

(you may have heard people in our modern day talk about meeting at “the watering hole”) and we can see why divine encounters would happen at wells.

Usually when people are coming to a well it is because they are seeking “water”, meaning that they are lost and in a “wilderness” time of their lives. The well becomes the symbol of their sustenance, and the place where they make their own chance encounter. For Hagar, Jacob, and Moses they all came to a well because they had been cast out of their homes, and for the woman that Jesus encounters at the well, she had been ostracized from her community due to her licentious behavior. Even in the fairytale Snow White this same theme is used. She is in a place of trial, her dad is dead and her step-mom is jealous of her beauty and mistreats her as a result. She goes to a well to make a wish and encounters her prince.

What this means for us, is that God desires to encounter people in similar circumstances. When we go through a season like this, what we want most is to meet God at the other end of the trial when everything is resolved. But oftentimes this isn't what God does. Instead He uses our time in the wilderness to teach us our extreme need for Him and then we are opened up to meet Him and see Him as our greatest need.

It was in Moses' time in the wilderness that this truth was driven home for him. After the people of Israel constructed a golden calf to worship, God made Moses an interesting deal. He told Moses that because the Israelites had sinned, He would no longer go up to the promised land with them, but would instead send an angel that would give them the victory in the land of Canaan. However Moses rejects this offer by saying this:

“Then Moses said to the LORD, “See, You say to me, ‘Bring up this people.’ But You have not let me know whom You will send with me. Yet You have said, ‘I know you by name, and you have also found grace in My sight.’ “Now therefore, I pray, if I have found grace in Your sight, show me now Your way, that I may know You and that I may find grace in Your sight. And consider that this nation is Your people.” And He said, “My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.” Then he said to Him, “If Your Presence does not go with us, do not bring us up from here.”

-Exodus 33:12-15

This is a radical statement by Moses. He had become so enamored by the presence of God, that He would rather stay in the wilderness with God than be brought into the land of promise without God. This is the heart that is being cured of its idolatry. This is what it sounds like when someone truly discovers in their season of want, that God is all they truly need.

Encountering God in Repentance

“And it came to pass at that time that Abimelech and Phichol, the commander of his army, spoke to Abraham, saying, “God is with you in all that you do. “Now therefore, swear to me by God that you will not deal falsely with me, with my offspring, or with my posterity; but that according to the kindness that I have done to you, you will do to me and to the land in which you have dwelt.” And Abraham said, “I will swear.” Then Abraham rebuked Abimelech because of a well of water which Abimelech’s servants had seized. And Abimelech said, “I do not know who has done this thing; you did not tell me, nor had I heard of it until today.” So Abraham took sheep and oxen and gave them to Abimelech, and the two of them made a covenant. And Abraham set seven ewe lambs of the flock by themselves. Then Abimelech asked Abraham, “What is the meaning of these seven ewe lambs which you have set by themselves?” And he said, “You will take these seven ewe lambs from my hand, that they may be my witness that I have dug this well.” Therefore he called that place Beersheba, because the two of them swore an oath there. Thus they made a covenant at Beersheba. So Abimelech rose with Phichol, the commander of his army, and they returned to the land of the Philistines.

-Genesis 21:22-32

This leads us to the final encounter in this story, Abraham’s. In the last chapter, Abraham was caught in a lie by this man, Abimelech, and Abraham’s lie caused this man to be cursed by God. It is for this reason, symbolically, that the conflict in this section is over a well. As stated before, wells were a symbol of divine provision as well as a place of meeting. Through his sin, Abraham has sinned against God and caused division in his relationships with his fellow man. On top of this, Abraham also had to send his own son away from him. This means that like Hagar, Abraham is in a wilderness season, but unlike Hagar, this season is a result of his own sin.

Forgiveness and Consequences

“If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

-1 John 1:9

It is true that when we sin against God and we confess that sin, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins. However, God is not an enabling parent. He will not spare us from the consequences of our decisions. Many people, when they fail, they think that since God has forgiven them they shouldn’t have to face any consequences for their behavior. That their sins should be in the past and not have any importance on their present. This attitude is ignorant of the purpose of God’s discipline.

“And you have forgotten the exhortation which speaks to you as to sons: “My son, do not despise the chastening of the LORD, Nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him; For whom the LORD loves He chastens, And scourges every son whom He receives.”

-Hebrews 12:5-6

When a loving father disciplines their child, this is not because they haven't forgiven their child, but instead it is because they desperately want their child to learn their lesson so that they don't repeat their mistake. It is actually an act of negligence for a parent to offer their child forgiveness without consequences. By doing this, we may avoid the pain of having to discipline our children, but we have also deprived our children of the effects of good discipline. Because of this, we are setting our kids up for failure and guaranteeing that they will repeat their errors to their own harm.

God is not like this, He will allow natural consequences in the lives of those He loves. Not because He is mean or unloving, but because He loves us so much that He wants us to learn our lesson. Because of this, it is important not to resent the discipline of our Lord, not to run from consequences, but instead to receive the discipline well and learn what we need to from our consequences.

Abraham here is paying dearly for two particular failures in his life. Because of his bad decision to have an illegitimate child with Hagar, he now has to send her and his own son away. Some of us will go through a similar circumstance. For instance, a man might cheat on his wife, and through this affair, seriously screw up the life of the woman that he had sex with and possibly create a child with her that he will not be able to properly parent if he wants to heal things with his own wife. While this is a painful reality, there is no way for him to take back his actions, he merely has to live with the consequences of his decisions.

On top of that, Abraham was caught in a public lie that almost ruined an entire city. Like it or not, when we are caught in lies, the consequence will be that people will not trust us. Just because someone forgives us, does not mean that trust is automatically restored. Trust is not something that we are entitled to, it is something that we earn through acts of faithfulness. When we break someone's trust, the natural consequence is that they won't trust us anymore. However, this isn't a permanent thing, while trust can be broken, it can also be mended. Abraham may have been angry that God exposed his sin, but in the light of exposure, he is now given the opportunity to make things right, and that is exactly what he does.

Failing Well

“For a righteous man may fall seven times And rise again, But the wicked shall fall by calamity.”

-Proverbs 24:16

One of the reasons that I love the life of Abraham so much is because he demonstrates for us that act of repentance so well. While Abraham was far from a perfect man, he was a man that owned his failures and sought to make them as right as he could. The truth is, that all of our lives will be a combination of successes and failures. A good person is not that person who never fails, because we all fail, the good person is the one who learns from their failure, gets back up, and does better the next time.

Many people are stuck in a cycle of failure. They find themselves in a sin that repeats itself over and over again within their life. They keep trying harder to stop, but each time they are met with failure. I find this within my own life, especially in my struggles with lust. In the past I would commit myself to avoiding pornography, only to find myself falling again. This cycle of failure was discouraging, but I continued to beat my head against the wall in trying the same strategy over and over again expecting better results. For some reason I thought that by merely “trying harder” I could overcome my issues, and I never considered that I needed to confess my sin.

When God “outed” Abraham, he didn’t do this to destroy his relationships, the fact is, that lies destroy genuine relationships all on their own. If I have a relationship with someone that is shrouded by secrecy and half truths, that is not a genuine relationship. If I am sinning against someone, the only way that relationship can be healed is through confession. And oftentimes, when we don’t have the strength to confess our own sins, God will do that for us. Not to embarrass us, but to teach us this valuable lesson.

But notice that Abraham doesn’t approach his exposure in this way. While the first time he is confronted he does some justifying, ultimately he owns up to his failure, and in this chapter he is willing to make a public covenant with Abimelech to make amends with him. But after Abraham does this, look at what happens to him.

“Then Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beersheba, and there called on the name of the LORD, the Everlasting God. And Abraham stayed in the land of the Philistines many days.”

-Genesis 21:33-34

His willingness to take responsibility for his behavior and make amends allows for him to restore his relationship with God. Even after receiving his son Isaac, it still didn’t

seem like his relationship with God was repaired, it is only at this exact moment that he again calls on the name of the Lord. When we have sinned and failed, the only way that we are going to encounter God is through repentance. We can't "make up" for our failure through good deeds, but when we stop running from consequences and face our mistakes head on, then we have the opportunity to encounter and experience God again. So through all three of these stories we see that what God is most interested in doing in our lives is helping us to value Him supremely. When we glorify God in the appropriate way, when we truly do see Him as being more valuable than any other thing, then we will seek to encounter God above all else, even when that encounter is in the wilderness, or the humility of confession and repentance.

"By faith Moses, when he became of age, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin, esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt; for he looked to the reward."

-Hebrews 11:24-26