

**Unearthed Sermon 8
Hagar and Leah**

**Dan Hamel
June 4, 2023**

Good morning, everyone. I am really happy to be with you today. Most of you know the last several weeks have been very difficult for me and my family. About three weeks ago my mom passed away. It was unexpected and sudden. She died in her sleep. I spent a week with my siblings in Colorado as we held her funeral and her burial, and I've taken additional time away from work to rest and be with family and friends. Everyone from church asks, "How are you doing?" And the answer is, "It depends on the moment." Some moments I am really sad that I won't get to see my mom again, to share a meal with her, to watch her enjoy her grandkids, to talk to her about the exciting things happening in life. At other times I am really grateful—grateful that I had such a wonderful mom, grateful that we had such a great relationship, grateful that I got to be with her for 12 days right before she passed away, and most importantly I am grateful that she is with Jesus. My mom loved God so much, and now she gets to be with him every moment of every day.

Mom loved being at this church. She was with us her last two weekends alive. She joined us for a Tuesday night class on how to study the Bible. She was with us Sunday night at our high school ministry. That was mom's very last worship service. She was here with Keren, me, and our three kids. As the high school students were up here worshiping and dancing, me and mom and the kids were in the isle, dancing to "Glorious Day." She was dancing with my son, singing, "You called my name, and I ran out of that grave. Out of the darkness, into your glorious day." What a gift to have a preview on Sunday night of what would happen just a few days later.

I could talk about mom all morning, but I really wanted to take a moment and say thank you. Thank you to Eric, Shan, and Mike who preached for me so I could spend time with family. Thank you for the support, love, and prayer. I have received hundreds of text messages, dozens of cards, flowers, and meals. People came over to clean our house and mow our grass while we were gone. People watched our kids so Keren and I could process things as a couple. Several of the elders of this church flew out to Colorado to be with me at the funeral and the burial. There have been a lot of hard moments these last few weeks, but we have never been alone. You have loved me and my family so well, and we are profoundly thankful!

I want to kick the sermon off by telling a story about mom. During her last visit with us she decided to take the kids on a walk, and as mom always did, she wanted to find a way to make it fun and engaging. She decided to have our kids put on nature bracelets. I didn't know what a nature bracelet was. But mom took some thick scotch tape, turned it inside out, and wrapped it around their wrists. Then as they went on their walk, they could pick up anything that they saw in nature, stick it on their bracelet, and add it to their collection. A dandelion, a small pebble, a blade of grass, a leaf—whatever you walk by that you think will stick, you pick it up, and it stays with you for the rest of the walk.

That nature bracelet represents a far deeper reality than most of us realize at first blush. As we go through life, every one of us picks things up, things stick to us, they attach themselves to us. But unlike with the nature bracelet, the things that cling to us are not nearly as easy to see or remove as a leaf or a blade of grass. It's the rejection you felt that started the time your friend from middle school ditched you for the more popular kids. It's the abandonment you felt when your parents divorced and you only saw your dad a few days a month ("Why didn't he fight to have more time with me?"). Maybe you experienced abuse as a child and you've always wondered why no one was there to protect you. Did no one care enough about you? It could be the constant hits against your identity and value. Maybe it's the narrative of never being wanted that started when the person you had a crush on dumped you, got worse when you didn't get into your top college, and then was made worse still when your company had to do a round of layoffs and you were one of the first to go. Maybe your marriage didn't work out, or your adult kids didn't turn

out as successful or well-adjusted or as committed to Jesus as you hoped. There are so many things that, as we go through life, end up impacting us. But we usually don't wear them on our wrists and look at them every day. They are kept deeper inside of us, under the surface, out of sight for others, often out of sight for us. But in this journey we are in as a church, we are talking about unearthing these parts of our lives, bringing them to the surface, allowing God to meet us in those places, heal and restore us, so that we can bring our whole selves to God.

Today, we are going to look at two very important women in the Old Testament who went through some very challenging seasons in life, who were wounded and hurt by what happened to them, but who ultimately met God in that place of difficulty and found his life-changing grace. They might be a model or an example for us to look to in our own lives. I want to spend a few minutes on each story, unpacking the details, and then we'll talk about the impact on our lives.

Before we dive in, I think it is important to recognize that both of these women had very difficult lives and had very unfair, unjust things happen to them. Occasionally, we read things like that in the Bible, and if we aren't good students committed to really thinking about things, we'll walk away thinking that God approves of these things, that he condones them. Nothing could be further from the truth. The injustice that happened to these women was not at God's direction, and the consequences that everyone experienced serve as a warning to us: This is not what God wants. When you do these things, everyone suffers. But nevertheless, it's because injustice and heartache happen in the real world that the Bible addresses these things and shows us how God meets us in those moments of need.

The first woman we are going to talk about today is named Hagar. Hagar was born an Egyptian and then somehow ended up as a slave in Abram's household (Abram, the same man who will later be given the name Abraham). We don't know how she got there, but by the time her story picks up in Genesis 16 (you can turn there if you have your Bible), she is a servant to Sarai (the same woman who will later be given the name Sarah), Abram's wife. Here's what we read: "Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. But she had an Egyptian slave named Hagar; so she said to Abram, 'The LORD has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my slave; perhaps I can build a family through her'" (Genesis 16:1-2). We get what is going on here. Sadly, this was a very common practice in the ancient world. For some reason, Sarai wasn't able to conceive, but she desperately wanted a child. She felt like God had promised her and her husband a child. Not willing to wait any longer and not willing to leave it in God's control, she took matters into her own hands and told her husband to sleep with Hagar and treat her as a second wife. She is given a much more honorable title and status than a servant, but it's far from the fairy tale wedding or family that she dreamt about as a young girl.

Abram slept with Hagar, and she conceived. When she knew she was pregnant, she began to despise her mistress. Then Sarai said to Abram, "You are responsible for the wrong I am suffering. I put my slave in your arms, and now that she knows she is pregnant, she despises me." (Genesis 16:4-5)

In other words, Sarai is saying, "Look, Abram—I tried to make you happy by giving you my servant to be your second wife and have a child. You have a second wife now and a child on the way, but now I am being treated like leftover goods in my own house. This isn't what I wanted!" Abram was such a wimp. He didn't want to get in the middle of the disagreement between these two women so he said to Sarai, "Your slave is in your hands. . . Do with her whatever you think best" (Genesis 16:6).

Forget the fact that he married this woman and slept with her. Now he says, "Who am I as a man to speak into this matter between two women? Do whatever you want." This is where it gets even more sad. "Then Sarai mistreated Hagar" (Genesis 16:6b). Maybe it was emotional abuse; it could have been physical

abuse. We don't know the details. We just know the situation became unbearable for Hagar, so the sentence concludes with, ". . . so she fled from her." So here we have a situation where a woman with no possessions to her name, a slave, is fleeing from her only source of protection, her only source of provision. She is wandering in the wilderness—and, oh yeah, she happens to be pregnant at the time! In the middle of the desert, she sat down next to a spring. You've got to imagine she was sitting there thinking, "Why? Why has this happened to me? This is so unfair. Why was I sold into slavery? Why was I forced to marry my master's husband? Why, when I conceived, did my master treat me so poorly? Why doesn't anyone see me? Why doesn't anyone care about me? Why isn't anyone looking out for me, protecting me, caring for me?"

"The angel of the Lord found Hagar near a spring in the desert; it was the spring that is beside the road to Shur. And he said, 'Hagar, slave of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going?'" (Genesis 16:7-8). In other words, "I know your name, I know that you are the slave of Sarai, so I know about everything that has happened to you. Tell me what where you have come from and where you are going." God is not talking about geography here. He's not talking about the directions on a map—he's talking about the direction of her life. Tell me what's happened to you. Tell me your story. Of course, God knows everything. He knew every detail of her life. The number of hairs on her head. But he wanted to meet with Hagar, connect with her, honor her experience, allow her to express herself in her own words. God met with her. Eventually God told her to go back to the family she fled from, that he had a plan that was going to be worked out, in part through the child she is carrying. She listened to God, and then, "She gave this name to the Lord who spoke to her: 'You are the God who sees me,' for she said, 'I have now seen the One who sees me'" (Genesis 16:13).

There is a twofold aspect to this declaration, each part of which is incredibly profound. First, she gave God a name. In Hebrew the name is "El Roi," and it means, "You are the God who sees me." Do you realize how profound a statement this is? "You are the God who sees me. You are not a God who is far off—you are the God who sees me. You are not a God who is distant—you are the God who sees me. You are not a God who is unaware, aloof, disinterested, disengaged—you are the God who sees me." That is our God. But that is only the first side of the equation. Hagar not only says, "You are the God who sees me," she also says (this takes it over the top), "I have now seen the One who sees me. Not only does God see me, but he has also allowed me to see him. Not only can I know that God knows me, but he also lets me know him." The intimacy, the familiarity, the closeness—there is no other religion in the world where there is a God so transcendent and also so immanent; so high and exalted in the heavens, but also so near; so powerful and also so approachable.

This was the passage I was studying the week that Mom died. I spent all day Tuesday and Wednesday studying these verses. As it turned out, Tuesday was mom's last day on earth, and Wednesday, though I didn't know it yet, was mom's first day in heaven. My mom's testimony her entire life, through all the ups and downs was, "God sees me, God knows me, God's eyes are on me." And now her testimony for all of eternity is, "My eyes are on him." God was so gracious to take me to this passage during this crucial window of my life.

That's Hagar's story. Hold on to that as we turn our attention to the second woman in our sermon today, Leah. Her story is found in Genesis 29, where we first meet a man named Jacob, Abraham and Sarah's grandson. He was a twin, and as the younger son, he was often overlooked by his father. Jacob's father intended to offer his family blessing to his oldest son, Esau, but Jacob found out about it, dressed up, and pretended to be his brother. Because his father had lost his eyesight, he was tricked and gave his blessing to Jacob. When his deception was discovered, everyone in the house was angry, and Jacob, fearful for his life, fled hundreds of miles away and ended up in his Uncle Laban's house, working for him. He worked in the field, tending to his uncle's flocks. Before long, his uncle realized Jacob was incredible—he had the

golden touch. Every flock he oversaw was healthy and thriving. Laban wanted to keep Jacob around, so he and Jacob talked about the terms of Jacob's employment. Jacob said, "I'll work for you for seven years if you let me marry one of your daughters."

Now Laban had two daughters; the name of the older was Leah, and the name of the younger was Rachel. Leah had weak eyes, but Rachel had a lovely figure and was beautiful. Jacob was in love with Rachel and said, "I'll work for you seven years in return for your younger daughter Rachel." (Genesis 29:16-17)

There are several things to tease out here: Jacob wanted to marry the younger sister, Rachel. Leah, who was older, had weak eyes, which most scholars believe is an indirect way to say she wasn't very pleasing to look at. She was unattractive, whereas her sister Rachel had a lovely figure and was beautiful. Without being too graphic, this is the author's way of saying that both her body and her face met the standards for beauty at the time. She was gorgeous and Jacob was in love with her. He said, "I'll work for you for seven years in order to be able to marry her. I know she has a bride price, but I clearly don't have any money, so I'll work off the price." Now, he wasn't the best negotiator in the world. From what we know about the ancient economy, the going price for a bride was roughly 18 months of work, so he was willing to pay four to five times the going rate because he was infatuated with Rachel and would do anything for her. Laban couldn't turn the deal down. He didn't say yes, but he gave the indication that he was for the deal, so Jacob committed to seven years.

Seven years come and go. That's a long time. But because Jacob loved Rachel so much, the time seemed like only a few days to him. When the wedding day came, the father of the bride threw an enormous feast, a huge celebration for everyone in the community. There was lots of food, and, you can imagine, a lot of alcohol. It appears that Jacob must have been intoxicated, because after the sun set and it grew dark and it was time for him to consummate the marriage, Laban tricked him and sent in his older daughter Leah, the weak-eyed girl, the unattractive sister, to be with Jacob. With no lights, Jacob, intoxicated as he was, was none the wiser. Then, "When morning came, there was Leah!" (Genesis 29:25). As you can imagine, Jacob was furious. But in that moment, he would have been struck to the heart, as well. The very thing he did to his father has now been done to him. He dressed up as his brother and went to his father who couldn't see to steal his covenantal blessing. Now the same thing has happened to him—in the dark he couldn't see that one sister had been passed off for the other. He had this coming to him. Eventually Laban said, "Look, I had to marry off the oldest one first; you can't blame me for this. But I'll let you marry Rachel right now if you agree to stay and work for me seven more years." Jacob was stuck here, so he agreed. He ended up with two wives, and as if that wasn't a big enough recipe for disaster, these two wives ended up being treated differently by their husband, which increased the sibling rivalry and magnified Leah's sense of being unwanted. "Jacob's love for Rachel was greater than his love for Leah" (Genesis 29:30). Every day of her life she was reminded that she wasn't really wanted, that her husband thought she wasn't good enough or pretty enough. He was only with her because he thought he had to be. What a tragic and heartbreaking place to be, to feel unloved.

God saw that Leah was unloved and showed favor to her. He blessed her womb, and she was able to conceive children, which in the ancient world was the ultimate way a woman could contribute to society and, more than anything else, the way she derived her value and worth. This is where we get incredible insight into the psychology of Leah and learn how she ended up meeting with the Lord in this place of being overlooked and unloved.

Leah became pregnant and gave birth to a son. She named him Reuben, for she said, "It is because the Lord has seen my misery. Surely my husband will love me now." She conceived again, and when she gave birth to a son she said, "Because the Lord heard that I am not loved, he

gave me this one too.” So she named him Simeon. Again she conceived, and when she gave birth to a son she said, “Now at last my husband will become attached to me, because I have borne him three sons.” So he was named Levi. She conceived again, and when she gave birth to a son she said, “This time I will praise the Lord.” So she named him Judah. Then she stopped having children. (Genesis 29:32-35)

That’s a lot of childbearing. But you can see the journey Leah went on with the name she gave each child and the commentary she offered on it:

- Reuben: Surely my husband will love me now.
- Simeon: The Lord gave me this one because he heard I am not loved.
- Levi: Now at last my husband will become attached to me,
- Judah: This time I will praise the Lord.

With each of her first three children she assumed, “Now that I’ve done this, now that I’ve done what everyone says women are supposed to do—now, now I will be loved, now my husband will see me and appreciate me. Now I’ll be enough.” But it wasn’t until she had her fourth son that she realized the futile, never-ending nature of that carousel and resolved to no longer receive her value or worth in what she could produce. She said, “This time I will praise the Lord.”

This journey that Leah went on is an example of the journey that every single person who has ever lived sooner or later has to go on. We are hardwired from birth to seek approval and love from others by what we can do—the grades we get in school, the accomplishments we make on the field or court, the friends we make, the job we get, the things we buy, the money we acquire, the spouse we marry, the kids we raise. In every stage of life, it’s different. In every culture or subculture that which is sought after varies, but the message is the same: You need to do these things in order to be worthy, to be justified, to have your value affirmed, to know that you are truly loved.

But that is an exhausting journey that never ends, an elusive deceptive carrot that we can never catch. Sooner or later, if we are ever going to have any peace in our lives, we have to arrive at the place that Leah did, get off the hamster wheel, realize our value and worth will never be in what we do but in who we are, and say, whether we are unbelievably successful in the eyes of the world or an utter failure, “I will praise the Lord.” Whether we are attractive or desirable, or the last one picked, “This time I will praise the Lord.” Even when no one else loved Leah, God did. Leah finally came to the place where she lived out of God’s unconditional love for her, no longer seeking the always conditional love of other people. What a gift.

Here we have two women: one who felt unseen for whom God showed up and said, “Not only do I see you and know you, I want to you to see me and know me,” and another who was passed over and rejected, who tried constantly to prove her worth by what she could do, who finally said, “Because God loves me, I can rest in the value and worth he has assigned me and live out of my trusted identity as the beloved of God, regardless of what anyone else thinks.”

I began the message today by talking about a bracelet made from tape, and said sometimes, as we go through life, we pick things up that end up shaping us in ways we don’t want. The beautiful thing about Jesus is that his love for us is stronger than that tape. He comes and takes away our pain, our rejection, our loneliness, our isolation. His love is even strong enough to take away our sins. His death on the cross tells us that even when we don’t feel seen, he sees us. Even when we don’t feel loved, he loves us. And that reality, the reality of God, in the person of Jesus Christ, knowing everything about us, and loving us to the point of dying for us, becomes the defining reality of our lives!