

A 7-WEEK BIBLE
STUDY EXPERIENCE



Moms *at the Well*

MEETING GOD THROUGH THE
MOTHERS OF SCRIPTURE

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Introduction

We always wanted to be mothers, yet neither of us was sure it would ever happen. For Kathy, it was because she was the “unmarriageable” daughter. For Tara, it was because her first baby was stillborn. So when God gave us children, we were delighted and grateful. As women with doctorates in human development, we thought we were going to be great mothers, mothers who didn’t exhibit the sin patterns of our mothers and grandmothers, mothers who didn’t yell or criticize or worry, mothers who would write the book on how to be great moms.

And then . . .

Motherhood hit.

If you saw us in our worst moments, you would agree that we are not the women to write about how to be great moms. Motherhood has been one of the most challenging experiences we’ve faced. Kathy calls the fourteen years of parenting three young children her “dark night of the soul.” Tara’s children say she has “dictator syndrome,” often when she is struggling to believe that God is trustworthy to care for her children. Motherhood has stripped us bare, exposing our deepest fears and failures. Yet God has also used motherhood to transform our lives. In the midst of all of motherhood’s highs and lows, Jesus invited us on a journey of spiritual transformation, deeper and deeper into his transforming love.

This Bible study, therefore, is not filled with advice on how to be a better mother. There are a ton of great books out there to help you do that; this just isn’t one of them. Instead, by studying the lives of biblical women, especially mothers, we will meet the God who invites us into a process of spiritual transformation that takes place in five steps:

1. *God meets us where we are.*
2. *God welcomes us into honest conversation.*
3. *God calls us to trust and obey.*
4. *God transforms us and sets us free.*
5. *God invites us to be agents of shalom.*



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What do you notice about these five steps? That's right—they all start with God. As we'll discover, God meets us where we are and then initiates every step along the way, allowing us to say yes or no to each invitation. While these steps are not necessarily linear—after all, God is never constrained by a formula—we've been surprised by how often they show up in the stories we read in Scripture, as well as in our own lives and experiences.

If you, like some of the women we will study, aren't always sure that God is good and can be trusted, that's okay. Getting to know God and God's character is what this Bible study series is all about. While God's love can feel more tangible when life is sweet, these studies help us experience God's good news for us when we feel afraid, angry, envious, or just plain miserable.

Motherhood gives us the chance to experience God's transformative love in the midst of both the highs and the lows. Jesus will be there through the joy of wobbly first steps, the warmth of cuddles, and the pride of watching your child accomplish something she never thought she could. And he will be there through sleepless nights and temper tantrums, anxious days waiting for a scary diagnosis, angry fights when your teen breaks curfew, and anguish as your adult child's marriage struggles. Jesus promises his transformational presence and love in the midst of it all.

What a great promise! Not only for us as individuals, but for our children, our communities, and our world. As God's love transforms our individual lives, we become agents of God's kingdom, joining God's mission of shalom—the biblical vision of harmony and wholeness for the whole world.

YOU ARE NOT ALONE

We surveyed over seven hundred moms to better understand their experiences of motherhood and how those experiences affected their faith. These moms ranged in age from twenty-three to more than sixty years old, and had anywhere from one to seven children. Twenty-four percent of them were single, adoptive, divorced, or fostering parents; nearly 40 percent were women of color. To better understand our survey results, we conducted in-depth interviews with more than a dozen women. Each of their stories was unique, shaped by their personalities and histories, and each was inspirational. And yet each

YOU ARE NOT ALONE

WHEN ASKED TO DESCRIBE THE HARDEST PARTS OF PARENTING, THE MOST COMMON RESPONSES SOUND LIKE THOSE FROM THESE EIGHT RESPONDENTS:

1. I don't have other mothers with whom I can share what's really going on with me and my family. It's lonely.
2. I used to be so close to God. But after children, I don't have time to do what I used to do.
3. The amount of worry I have for my children can take my breath away.
4. The gospel that is preached is too thin to help me navigate my experience of motherhood.
5. I never know if God thinks I am being too lenient or too strict, working too much or too little, etc.
6. I can't balance it all, and I feel like I am failing at everything.
7. I have so little control over my temper, my children's decisions, and their safety—and I feel vulnerable.
8. I see my own sin in my children and I feel hopeless to change it.

of them, along with our survey respondents, expressed different ways that motherhood was difficult, really difficult.

From our surveys and interviews, we learned that moms struggle with worry, escapism, comparison, anger, a desire for control, and even feelings of heartbreak. Perhaps not surprising, moms found it difficult to connect with God amid these struggles. They couldn't find time to pray or read the Bible. Many felt hopeless about some aspect of parenting, and some even said they found parenting so difficult it caused them to doubt the existence of God. The women in our survey expressed a longing to experience God's transformational love in the midst of some really tough stuff.

Maybe you share that longing as well. If so, you are not alone, and these studies are for you.

MEETING AT THE WELL

Because loneliness in mothering was reported by the majority of the women who took our survey, we've designed the studies in this book to be enjoyed with a friend or small group. We think of the studies as a way for moms to gather at the well.

In ancient times (and in many places in the world today) women spent large parts of their day at wells, drawing water for their families. They needed water for drinking, cleaning, and watering their animals and crops. Getting this life-saving water took work. Wells were usually located outside of town: every morning women walked the path to the well, balancing a large clay jar on their head or shoulders. They drew water from the deep well, then carried the even heavier jar home. But the difficult work had its upsides; it provided a social time as friends and neighbors walked together, took turns drawing water, and enjoyed each other's company.

We have our own wells, places where moms gather regularly: at playgroups and playgrounds; on sidelines and in bleachers; in break rooms and waiting rooms; at band concerts and PTA fundraisers; and in our living rooms and church basements for Bible study and prayer. When these "wells" are healthy, we are seen and heard, encouraged and challenged. We find the water we need to get us and our families through the next day.

These wells are also great places to meet God. This shouldn't surprise us: God was always meeting women at wells. The Bible uses several different words to describe places to get water; *wells*, *springs*, and *fountains* are present from Genesis to Revelation, and God shows up at them all. God found Hagar at a well when she fled abuse. God orchestrated Rebekah's marriage to Isaac when she came to draw water from a well. And Jesus waited for the Samaritan woman at a well. Whether our biblical sisters were fleeing abuse, taking care of their families, or hiding from their scornful neighbors, God met them where they were. Women spent much of their day at wells—ordinary days, painful days, and even days of crisis. So naturally God showed up at wells.

Think of this book as a way to gather with other mothers at a well and drink in God's life-sustaining water. Each study is designed to be practical and user friendly for busy and tired moms, and each includes several sections: a video with important biblical background, a group study, five daily devotionals, and a sabbath activity to enjoy with your whole family.

As you work through each study, we encourage you to notice where the Holy Spirit nudges you to pause, listen, and pray. Many of us are tempted to think, talk, and problem solve, rather than ask God for insight and help. To help you stop and listen, reflection sections often

include an invitation to pause and ask the Holy Spirit to speak to you. As you do, we think you'll be surprised by how consistently God shows up—revealing truth and showering you with love and grace.

Whether it takes you seven weeks or seven years to walk with God through these studies, we pray that you will be richly blessed. As you gather at the well and dig into God's Word, may you experience Jesus drawing near, inviting you on a journey of spiritual transformation. We urge you to accept his invitation and follow him. We have, and it's changed everything.

GROUP COMMITMENTS

Groups function well when members share the same commitments about how to interact. Look at these suggested commitments, and decide if your group would like to keep, modify, or add any.

1. Listen actively without giving advice
2. Let folks finish their thoughts without interrupting
3. Take wise risks to share the vulnerable truth about your life
4. Be mindful of how much space you take up in the group (if you're a talker, listen more; if you're a listener, talk a little more)
5. Have a learning posture
6. Be open to what God has for you
7. Keep confidentiality—what's said in the group stays in the group





WEEK 1

When We Feel Unseen

GROUP BIBLE STUDY

INTRODUCTION TO WEEK 1

Have someone read the following aloud:

It's easy to feel unseen as a mom. We feel unseen when no one appreciates the countless dinners, playdates, and appointments we've made happen. We feel unseen when we get no credit for the never-ending to-do list we carry in our heads, trying to keep every living being in the house fed, clothed, and somewhat in their right minds. We feel unseen when our real lives, with our real hopes and struggles, aren't reflected in family leave policies, social media trends, or even in the sermons we hear each week. In a culture that renders the real lives of mothers invisible, the story of Hagar gives us great hope. An enslaved Egyptian outsider, Hagar is seen only as a potentially fertile servant. Her enslavers never even call her by name. Yet God sees Hagar, and God sees each of us. God meets Hagar at a well and is waiting to meet us too.

OPENING ACTIVITY

READ aloud this poem by Billy Collins.

“The Lanyard”

The other day I was ricocheting slowly
off the blue walls of this room,
moving as if underwater from typewriter to piano,
from bookshelf to an envelope lying on the floor,
when I found myself in the L section of the dictionary
where my eyes fell upon the word lanyard.

No cookie nibbled by a French novelist
could send one into the past more suddenly—
a past where I sat at a workbench at a camp
by a deep Adirondack lake
learning how to braid long thin plastic strips
into a lanyard, a gift for my mother.



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I had never seen anyone use a lanyard
or wear one, if that's what you did with them,
but that did not keep me from crossing
strand over strand again and again
until I had made a boxy
red and white lanyard for my mother.

She gave me life and milk from her breasts,
and I gave her a lanyard.

She nursed me in many a sick room,
lifted spoons of medicine to my lips,
laid cold face-cloths on my forehead,
and then led me out into the airy light

and taught me to walk and swim,
and I, in turn, presented her with a lanyard.
Here are thousands of meals, she said,
and here is clothing and a good education.
And here is your lanyard, I replied,
which I made with a little help from a counselor.

Here is a breathing body and a beating heart,
strong legs, bones and teeth,
and two clear eyes to read the world, she whispered,
and here, I said, is the lanyard I made at camp.
And here, I wish to say to her now,
is a smaller gift—not the worn truth

that you can never repay your mother,
but the rueful admission that when she took
the two-tone lanyard from my hand,
I was as sure as a boy could be
that this useless, worthless thing I wove
out of boredom would be enough to make us even

SHARE: When you think back about your own mother (or another person who raised you), what do you appreciate about them now that you didn't see at the time?



VIDEO

WATCH this week's video.

BIBLE STUDY

READ Genesis 16 aloud.



5. Imagining the labels others might have used to describe Hagar—foreigner, runaway, slave—what might it have meant to her that the angel of the Lord called her by name in verse 8?
6. How are the two questions in verse 8 an invitation for Hagar to have an honest conversation with God? How does she respond?
7. What does God tell Hagar to do in verse 9? Why would it be difficult to obey?
8. Identify the prophecies made in each verse:
- verse 10

 - verse 11

 - verse 12 (note: a wild donkey is akin to a wild mustang, roaming the plains freely)



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9. How could these prophecies make it easier for Hagar to obey the angel's difficult command?
10. In verse 13, Hagar gives God the name "You are the God who sees me." Out of all the names Hagar could have given God, why do you think she chose this one?
11. Later in Scripture, God fulfills all of the angel's prophecies, including that Ishmael will be free. But there are small signs of transformation even in this story.
- Beer Lahai Roi means the well of the Living One who sees me. What needed to happen for the well to have this name hundreds of years after the angel meets Hagar there (v. 14)?
 - Why is it significant that Abram named his son Ishmael (v. 15)?

Holy Spirit Check-In

Your Christian tradition may not emphasize listening to the Holy Spirit. But Scripture tells us that the Holy Spirit comforts, guides, teaches, instructs, convicts, helps, and intercedes for us. Not only that, the Spirit speaks to us (John 16:13-14)! If you are new to listening to the Holy Spirit, these studies give you plenty of opportunities to experiment, often with a one- or two-minute exercise. Rarely will you hear an audible voice. Instead, the Spirit may speak through a thought, a picture, a Scripture, or an impression. We have been amazed at how much the Spirit can do if we are willing to spend even a minute listening.

Breath Prayer

Breath prayer is a simple ancient practice that helps us pray throughout the day using our breath as a guide. We can use breath prayer as we walk, as we grocery shop, or during pauses at work. Breath prayer is great for busy moms—we simply breathe in a short phrase and breathe out another one.

HOLY SPIRIT CHECK-IN

Take one minute to tell the Holy Spirit about places you feel unseen or unheard. Then listen for one minute to hear what the Holy Spirit says in response. Briefly share what you experienced.

BREATH PRAYER

Take two minutes of silence to practice this breath prayer individually. Then share what, if anything, you experienced while praying. If you feel drawn to this prayer, you can practice it throughout the week.

INHALE: *God who sees me*

EXHALE: *See me now*

LEADER BENEDICTION

El Roi, thank you that you are the God who sees us. Thank you that you are the God who hears us. We long to meet you, to have genuine honest conversation with you. Yet we confess that it's often hard to tell you the truth about where we are right now. We either don't believe you'll speak to us, or we don't stop to hear your voice. We want to trust you, to obey you, to experience your transforming love, and to partner with you as an agent of shalom in the world. Help us to say yes to your invitations. Amen.



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GOD MEETS HAGAR WHERE SHE IS

When our story begins, the family that has enslaved Hagar sees her as property, good for serving her mistress and bearing her owners a child. She may have heard them talk about their God, the God who promised them a great legacy. But for Hagar, Abram's God is the god of her enslavers, a god who allowed the circumstances that brought her to slavery, who gives her no choices about where she lives, who she works for, who she has sex with, who impregnates her, and who takes her child.

Day 1

REFLECT: *In Genesis 16:1-6, given how Hagar's been treated by Abram and Sarai, what do you think she felt about the god of her enslavers?*



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This dysfunctional family of God lives in a cycle of pain and abuse. Hagar, pregnant with Abram's child, despises Sarai. Sarai blames Abram for the consequences of her plan. Abram disengages, saying, "Your slave is in your hands. . . . Do with her whatever you think best." He's a bystander who enables unjust treatment. Sarai mistreats Hagar so badly that Hagar takes off alone into the desert, heading back to Egypt despite the odds that she likely won't survive the journey. If she does survive, there may be no family with the means to support her and her child when she gets there.

Hagar is alone, vulnerable, and unseen.

OBSERVE *Genesis 16:7-8: Identify everything the angel of the Lord does.*

This is the first time the angel of the Lord appears in Scripture, and he goes looking for Hagar until he finds her at a well. Think about that: the angel of the Lord comes to meet Hagar, one of the most marginalized people in Scripture—female, pregnant, enslaved, and sexually exploited. God comes to meet her where she is—alone, despised, and desperate.

The angel speaks to Hagar, calling her by name. Until this moment in the story, no one else has called her by her name, Hagar, which means *flight* or *forsaken*. We don't know who named her or why. Perhaps her parents, knowing they had to sell her into slavery, named her *flight* to express their hopes for her, or *forsaken* as they gave her up. But God knows her name and calls her by name, "Hagar."

The angel then calls Hagar by circumstance: "slave of Sarai." By recognizing her circumstance, God lets Hagar know that her desperate situation matters to God. The first step in the remarkable relationship between God and Hagar is that the angel comes to her in the midst of a crisis that he names but does not let define her.

REFLECT: *If God were to call you by both name and circumstance, what would God call you? How would it feel if God was calling you only by name or circumstance, but not by both?*

Scripture gives us story after story of our good God pursuing people, whatever their name and whatever their situation. In fact, any spiritual impulse we have toward God happens because God takes the first step toward us. In Luke 15, Jesus describes himself as the shepherd who goes after lost sheep; the woman who relentlessly searches for her lost coin; the prodigal father who runs to welcome one lost son and then pleads for his other lost son to come into the party. Without insisting we reciprocate, God comes to us, always and everywhere. We don't have to earn God's presence; God goes looking and finds us wherever we are on our journey.

As with Hagar, God knows your name and your story. God knows where you've come from and where you're headed. God meets you wherever you are.

GOD MEETS US WHERE WE ARE

How has God come to find you in the past? If you are unsure, try to identify experiences where God sought you through:

- friends, family, or coworkers



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AN INVITATION: HOLY IMAGINATION

Take a moment to pause, like Hagar did. Imagine Jesus coming to you wherever you are. Write down what you imagine.

GOD WELCOMES HAGAR AND SARAI INTO HONEST CONVERSATION

Throughout Scripture, rather than lecturing, preaching, or ranting about what we've done wrong, God often greets us with questions, inviting us into a conversation. In Genesis 16:8, God calls out to Hagar and asks two questions at the heart of spiritual transformation:

Where have you come from?

Where are you going?

REFLECT: *How might these questions have made Hagar feel? How might she have been tempted to lie?*

Day 2



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Hagar answers the first question—she is running away from her mistress. It's astounding that Hagar told the angel the truth when she had little reason to believe that God cared about her. Maybe the way God called her by name, or looked her in the eye and smiled at her, gave her the courage. Hagar doesn't answer the second question, though—perhaps because she doesn't know where she's going. She doesn't know if she'll survive the journey. She doesn't know whether her family will receive her in Egypt. She doesn't know what will become of her child. Perhaps she hasn't even let herself hope for a better future but is simply desperate to get away from her abusive past.

Even though God already knows the answers, God asks questions because they invite us into relationship. God wants to hear what we have to say, and then respond. Back and forth, back and forth, until we're talking with God like a friend.

Questions aren't the only way God initiates conversations with us, but they are gifts each time they arise. They help us discern what's going on in our lives and help us know what God thinks we should focus on. If you're not sure about how powerful questions are, read through the Gospels and note the three-hundred-plus questions Jesus asks. Imagine what might change in your relationship with God if you read those questions as Jesus welcoming you into conversation, spent time wrestling with those questions, and asked Jesus questions of your own. Though some of us were raised to believe questioning is unspiritual, wrestling with questions—both God's and ours—actually deepens our relationship with God.

Even though God welcomes us into conversation, talking with God isn't always easy. When our story is painful, we may have a hard time talking honestly with God because it's too hard to face the pain. Other times, we feel ashamed and sharing leaves us feeling vulnerable. God never demands that we share. We have the power to spurn God's invitation, and this is what happens with Sarah in Genesis 18.

For thirteen years, Sarah's heard her husband, Hagar, and all the people of her camp call out "Ishmael" over and over—thirteen years of being told that "God hears" and wondering if God hears everyone but her. Now ninety, she overhears Abraham talking with three angels who promise, yet again, that Abraham will have a child through her.

OBSERVE *Genesis 18:10-15: What does Sarah say as she laughs? What do you think this reveals about her thoughts, hopes, and faith?*

Despite Abraham having regular conversations with God throughout his life, this is the only place where we see Sarah have that opportunity. Eavesdropping at the entrance to the tent, hearing the men talk about her deepest hopes, Sarah laughs to herself and doubts the visitors' promise. But God sees Sarah and hears what's on her heart even when she's hidden from plain view. God wants to start an honest conversation with her, inviting her in by asking Abraham why Sarah laughed. Sarah joins the conversation, but she is afraid and lies.

Laughing in response to God's impossible promise isn't a deal breaker—Abraham did it a chapter earlier and God didn't hold it against him; they just kept on talking. So why is Sarah afraid? Maybe it hurts too much to face her identity as “barren” again. Perhaps she can't get her hopes up one more time only to be crushed by disappointment. Or maybe she is simply afraid to tell God that she laughed because she doesn't trust that God cares about her or her dreams. Whatever caused her fear, when invited by God to share the truth, Sarah lies.

And the conversation stops right there.

Too often, like Sarah, we short-circuit our intimacy with God because we are afraid or unwilling to tell God the truth about where we are. The good news is that God is constantly waiting and eager to begin the conversation.



GOD WELCOMES US INTO HONEST CONVERSATION

1. Right this moment, without thinking too deeply about it, how do you respond to the angel's questions to Hagar:

Where have you come from?

Where are you going?

2. In what areas of your life have you stopped the conversation with God? Why?

AN INVITATION: HOLY SPIRIT PAUSE

Make a note card with the two questions the angel first asks Hagar: *Where have you come from? Where are you going?* Leave the card somewhere where you often find yourself rushing, like the dashboard of your car or the laundry room. When you see the card, take one deep breath and then share your answer with the Holy Spirit. It need not be deep. Your answer may be, "I just left an important work meeting. I'm headed to pick up the kids." Or it may sound more like,



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“I just left two children fighting in the living room. I’m trying to get a load of laundry done before I start dinner.” After sharing your answers, take a deep breath in, hold it for the count of five, then breathe out, “You see me, you hear me, God.”

GOD CALLS HAGAR TO TRUST AND OBEY

Hagar takes the risk of telling God the truth. And for a time, it isn’t clear that telling the truth is the right idea—because God tells her to go back and submit to Sarai.

Why would God tell Hagar to go back and submit to her mistress, to return to oppression and mistreatment? Everything feels wrong about that command. After all, nothing has changed. Hagar will continue to be enslaved. As far as she knows, her son will belong to another woman. Hagar will still be a foreigner, a slave, a powerless outsider exploited at the whims of the family insiders. Nothing has changed.

And yet everything has changed.

REFLECT on *Genesis 16:9-12*: How would naming her son Ishmael, “God hears,” help Hagar trust and obey God’s command to go back to slavery?

Hagar enters the desert with no hope and no future. She leaves with hope and a destiny. She now has a relationship with the God who has seen and heard her misery, a God who gives her a set of promises, including that she will have descendants too numerous to count—almost identical to the promise God gave Abram in chapter fifteen.

In the middle of the list of promises, God says that Ishmael will be a “wild donkey of a man.” Reading this today, that doesn’t sound like a compliment; but in Hagar’s ancient world, wild donkeys were free—more akin to wild mustangs. God promises Hagar that her son will not be enslaved and will father a free and nomadic nation. In other words, God doesn’t ask Hagar to accept slavery, but to trust that someday her son will be free.

God invites Hagar to trust that even if she’s unseen in Sarai’s family, *God sees her*. Even if Abram never hears her cries of misery, *God hears her*. She is the woman who has seen God face-to-face. Her son and his freedom will evidence God’s great love for Hagar. While her circumstances have not yet changed, her identity has. She is the one who is seen, heard, and loved by God.

REFLECT: *So many promises in the Bible will not be fulfilled right away, or even in this lifetime. How does knowing that God sees, hears, and loves you make it easier for you to trust God during times of suffering and waiting for God’s promises to be fulfilled?*

Hagar gives God the name *El Roi*, which can be translated, “The God who sees me.” Hagar is the first and only person in all of Scripture who dares name God. She obeys God’s very difficult command to return to Sarai because she’s met a good God who sees her and hears her cries, a good God who promises a great future for her son. God’s promises bring much better news than what awaits her alone in the desert. So she obeys the angel and returns.

Some people struggle with the word *obey*. To modern ears, obedience can sound oppressive. But obeying God simply means doing

AN INVITATION: HOLY SPIRIT PAUSE

Trust and obedience are like muscles that get stronger as you exercise them. Ask the Holy Spirit to show you one place you could trust God, and one baby step of obedience you could take today. Write it down, try it, and notice what happens.

Day 4

GOD TRANSFORMS HAGAR AND SETS HER FREE

We don't know specifics about Hagar's relationship with El Roi after she returns to camp. Did her encounter with El Roi change how she interacts with Sarai and Abram? Did it change her vision of the community she lives in? How might she now see others who are marginalized or victimized like herself?

REFLECT: *Take a minute to imagine how Hagar, knowing the God who both sees and hears her, now relates to those who enslave her. How do you think her interactions with Sarai and Abram might differ from earlier interactions?*



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