

Hagar and Ishmael Cast Out

by F.B. Meyer

The sermon explores the story of Hagar and Ishmael, highlighting the struggle between legalism and faith, and the importance of waiting on God.

Scripture: Genesis 21:1-12, Psalm 33:11, Matthew 20:22, Mark 10:38-39, John 16:21, Galatians 4:24-25

Topics: "Faith", "Spiritual Growth"

Description

F.B. Meyer explores the profound implications of Abraham's decision to cast out Hagar and Ishmael, emphasizing that true faith requires the removal of anything that hinders our relationship with God. He reflects on how Abraham's attachment to Hagar and Ishmael represented a lack of complete trust in God's promises, and how the painful process of separation was necessary for Abraham to fully embrace his role as the father of Isaac, the child of promise. Meyer encourages believers to examine their own lives for hidden idols and to be willing to endure the pruning necessary for spiritual growth, reminding them that God's timing is perfect and His plans are for their ultimate good.

Transcript

"Cast out this bondwoman and her son: for the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir... with Isaac." -- Genesis 21:10.

Even though we were hearing this story for the first time, and did not know of the grave crisis to which we were approaching in the next chapter, we might be sure that something of the sort was imminent; and we should rest our conclusion on the fact of the stern discipline through which the great patriarch was called to pass. Faith is the expression of our inner moral life; and it cannot be exercised in its loftiest form so long as there is any obliquity of the heart, any hidden or unholy affection. These things must be cut away, or passed through the fiery discipline of sorrow; that, being freed from them, the heart may exercise that supreme faith in God which is the fairest crown of human existence.

The Almighty Lover of souls knew the trial which awaited His child in the near future; and set Himself to prepare him for it, by ridding him of certain clinging inconsistencies, which would have paralyzed the action of his faith in the hour of trial. We have already seen how one of these -- the secret compact between himself and Sarah -- was exposed to the light and judged. We have now to see how another matter, the patriarch's connection with Hagar and her child, was also dealt with by Him, who acts on us either as fuller's soap, or if that be not strong enough, as a refiner's fire.

In what way the presence of Hagar and Ishmael hindered the development of Abraham's noblest life of faith, we cannot entirely understand. Did his heart still cling to the girl who had given him his firstborn son? Was there any secret satisfaction in the arrangement, which had at least achieved one cherished purpose, though it had been unblest by God? Was there any fear that if he were summoned to surrender Isaac, he would find it easier to do so, because, at any moment, he could fall back on Ishmael, as both son and heir? We cannot read all that was in Abraham's mind; but surely some such thoughts are suggested by the expressions which to this hour record the history of the anguish of this torn and lonely heart, as one darling idol after another was rent away, that he himself might be cast naked and helpless on the omnipotence of the Eternal God. "The thing was very grievous in Abraham's sight" (v.11).

It may be that not a few who read these lines sigh to possess a faith like that which Abraham had: a faith which staggers not through unbelief; a faith to which God cannot give a denial; a faith which can open and shut heaven, and to which all things are possible. But are you willing to pay the cost? -- the cost of suffering; the cost of rending from your heart all that would frustrate the cherished idol after another cast out; the cost of being stripped even to nakedness of all the dear delights in which the flesh may have found pleasure. "Are ye able to drink of the cup that I shall drink of, and to be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with? They say unto Him, We are able" (Matthew 20:22; Mark 10:38-39). You hardly realize all that is meant when you say so much; but it shall be revealed to you step by step; and nothing shall be too difficult, all being measured out according to your strength by Him who knows our frame and remembers that we are dust. Let us not dread the pruning-knife; for it is wielded by the hand of One who loves us infinitely, and who is seeking results that are to fill our hearts with eternal gratitude, and heaven with praise.

The final separation from Abraham of ingredients which would have been prejudicial to the exercise of a supreme faith was brought about by the birth of the long-promised child, which is alluded to at the commencement of this chapter (Genesis 21), and which led up to the crisis with which we are now dealing.

"The Lord visited Sarah as He had said, and the Lord did unto Sarah as He had spoken" (Genesis 21:1). It is impossible to trust God too absolutely. God's least word is a spar of imperishable wood driven into the Rock of Ages, which will never give, and on which you may hang your entire weight for evermore. "The counsel of the Lord standeth for ever; the thoughts of His heart to all generations" (Psalm 33:11).

BUT WE MUST BE PREPARED TO WAIT GOD'S TIME

"Sarah bare Abraham a son in his old age, AT THE SET TIME of which God had spoken unto him." God has His set times. It is not for us to know them; indeed, we cannot know them; we must wait for them. If God had told Abraham in Haran that he must wait for thirty years until he pressed the promised child to his bosom, his heart would have failed him. So, in gracious love, the length of the weary years was hidden, and only as they were nearly spent, and there were only a few more months to wait, God told him that "according to the time of life, Sarah shall have a son" (18:14). The set time came at last; and then the laughter that filled the patriarch's home made the aged pair forget the long and weary vigil. "And Abraham called the name of his son that was born unto him, whom Sarah bare unto him, ISAAC" (that is LAUGHTER). Take heart, waiting one, thou waitest for One who cannot disappoint thee; and who will not be five minutes behind the appointed moment: ere long "your sorrow shall be turned into joy."

"A woman, when she is in travail, hath sorrow, because her hour is come: but as soon as she is delivered of the child, she remembereth no more the anguish, for joy that a man is born into the world" (John 16:21). That joy may give the clue to the unwonted outburst of song on the part of the happy and aged mother. The laughter of incredulity, with which she received the first intimation of her approaching motherhood (18:12), was now exchanged for the laughter of fulfilled hope. And she gave utterance to words that approached the elevation of a rhythmic chant, and which served as the model of that other song with which the virgin mother announced the advent of her Lord. So Sarah said,

"God hath made me to laugh: Every one that heareth will laugh with me."

And long after, one of her daughters said,

"My soul doth magnify the Lord; And my spirit hath rejoiced In God my Savior. For He that is mighty Hath done to me great things; And holy is His name." Luke 1:46-49.

Ah, happy soul, when God makes thee laugh! Then sorrow and crying shall flee away for ever, as darkness before the dawn.

The peace of Abraham's house remained at first unbroken, though there may have been some slight symptoms of the rupture which was at hand. The dislike which Sarah had manifested to Hagar, long years before, had never been extinguished: it had only smouldered in her bosom, waiting for some slight incident to stir it again into a blaze. Nor had the warm passionate nature of Hagar ever forgotten those hard dealings which had driven her forth, to fare as best she might in the inhospitable desert. Abraham must have been often sorely put to it to keep the peace between them. At last the women's quarters could conceal the quarrel no longer, and the scandal broke out into the open day.

THE IMMEDIATE OCCASION OF THIS OPEN RUPTURE was the weaning of the young Isaac. "The child grew, and was weaned: and Abraham made a great feast the day that Isaac was weaned." But amid all the bright joy of that happy occasion, one shadow suddenly stole over the scene, and brooded on the mother's soul. Sarah's jealous eye saw Ishmael mocking. It was hardly to be wondered at. The lad had recently suffered a severe disappointment. He had grown up as the undisputed heir of all that camp, accustomed to receive its undivided loyalty; and it must have been very difficult to view with equanimity the preparations made in honor of the child who was destined to supersede him; and so, under the appearance of sportive jesting, he jeered at Isaac in a way which betrayed the bitterness of his soul; and which indeed he was at no pains to conceal. This awoke all Sarah's slumbering jealousy; which may have often been severely tested during the last few years by Ishmael's assumption and independent bearing. She would stand it no longer. Why should she, the chieftain's wife, and mother of his heir, brook the insolence of a slave? And so she said unto Abraham with a sneer and the sting of the old jealousy, "Cast out this bondwoman and her son; for the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son, even with Isaac."

WE CANNOT BUT RECALL THE USE WHICH THE GREAT APOSTLE MAKES OF THIS INCIDENT

In his days the Jews, priding themselves on being the lineal descendants of Abraham, refused to consider it possible that any but themselves could be children of God, and the heirs of promise. They arrogated to themselves exclusive privileges and position. And when large numbers of Gentiles were born into the Christian Church under the first preaching of the Gospel, and claimed to be the spiritual seed, with all the rights pertaining thereunto; they who, like Ishmael, were simply born after the flesh, persecuted them

which, like Isaac, were born after the Spirit. Everywhere the Jews set themselves to resist the preaching of the Gospel, which denied to them their exclusive privileges; and to harry those who would not enter the Church through the rites of Judaism. And ere long the Jewish nation was rejected; put aside; cast out. Succeeding ages have seen the building-up of the Church from among the once-persecuted ones, whilst the children of Abraham have wandered in the wilderness fainting for the true water of life (Galatians 4:29).

BUT THERE IS A STILL DEEPER REFERENCE

Hagar, the slave, who may even have been born in the Sinaitic Desert, with which she seems to have been so familiar, is a fit representative of the spirit of legalism and bondage, seeking to win life by the observance of the law, which was given from those hoary cliffs. Hagar is the covenant of Mount Sinai in Arabia, "which gendereth to bondage," and "is in bondage with her children" (Galatians 4:24-25). Sarah, the free woman, on the other hand, represents the covenant of free grace. Her children are love, and faith, and hope; they are not bound by the spirit of "must," but by the promptings of spontaneous gratitude; their home is not in the frowning clefts of Sinai, but in Jerusalem above, which is free, and is the mother of us all. Now, argues the Apostle, there was no room for Hagar and Sarah, with their respective children, in Abraham's tent. If Ishmael was there, it was because Isaac was not born. But as soon as Isaac came in, Ishmael must go out. So the two principles -- of legalism, which insists on the performance of the outward rite of circumcision; and of faith, which accepts the finished work of the Savior -- cannot coexist in one heart. It is a moral impossibility. As well could darkness coexist with light, and slavery with freedom. So, addressing the Galatian converts, who were being tempted by Judaizing teachers to mingle legalism and faith, the Apostle bade them follow the example of Abraham, and cast out the spirit of bandage which keeps the soul in one perpetual agony of unrest.

You, my readers, are trusting Christ; but, perhaps, you are living in perpetual bondage to your scruples; or, perhaps you are always endeavoring to add some acts of obedience, by way of completing and assuring your salvation. Ah! it is a great mistake. Cease to worry about these legal matters. Beware of morbid scrupulosity of conscience, one of the most terrible diseases by which the human spirit can be plagued. Do not always imagine that God's love to you depends on the performance of many minute acts, concerning which there are no definite instructions given. Trust Christ. Realize His wonderful and complete salvation. Work not towards sonship, but from it. "Cast out the bondwoman and her son." Live the free, happy life of Isaac, whose position is assured; and not that of Ishmael, whose position is dependent on his good behavior. "The servant abideth not in the house for ever; but the son abideth ever."

THE REMAINING HISTORY IS BRIEFLY TOLD

With many a pang --as the vine which bleeds copiously when the pruning knife is doing its work -- Abraham sent Hagar and her child forth from his home, bidding them a last sad farewell. In the dim twilight they fared forth, before the camp was astir. The strong man must have suffered keenly as he put the bread into her hand, and with his own fingers bound the bottle of water on her shoulder, and kissed Ishmael once more. And yet he must not let Sarah guess how much he felt it. How many passages in our lives are only known to God!

Yet it was better so. And God provided for them both. When the mother's hopes were on the point of expiring, and the lad lay dying of thirst in the scorching noon, under the slender shade of a desert shrub, the Angel of God stayed her sobs, pointed out the well of water to which her tears had made her blind, and

promised that her child should become a great nation. Ishmael would never have developed to his full stature if he had perpetually lived in the enervating luxury of Abraham's camp. There was not room enough there for him to grow. For him, as for us all, there was need of the free air of the desert, in which he should match himself with his peers, becoming strong by privation and want. That which seems like to break our hearts at the moment, turns out in after-years to have been of God. "And God said unto Abraham, Let it not be grievous in thy sight; in all that Sarah hath said unto thee, hearken unto her voice" (21:12).

One more weight was laid aside, and one more step taken in the preparation of God's "friend" for the supreme victory of his faith; for which his whole life had been a preparation, and which was now at hand.

Some flowers are the result of a century of growth, and the Divine Husbandman will consider Himself repaid for years of loving, patient care, if the life He has tended will bloom out into but one act, like that which we are soon to record. Such acts scatter the seeds of noble and heroic deeds for all future time.

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