

Hagar, the Slave Girl

by F.B. Meyer

F.B. Meyer explores the complexities of faith, self-life, and obedience through the story of Hagar, emphasizing the importance of waiting on God's timing and recognizing His care for the afflicted.

Scripture: Genesis 16:1-21

Topics: "Faith and Obedience", "The Self-Life"

Description

F.B. Meyer explores the story of Hagar, the slave girl, emphasizing the complexities of faith and the self-life in the journey of obedience to God. He highlights how Abraham and Sarah's impatience led to a decision that caused great sorrow and conflict, illustrating the dangers of taking matters into our own hands rather than waiting for God's timing. Meyer points out that even in our struggles, God sees us and calls us to return and submit to His will, promising that obedience will lead to blessings. The sermon serves as a reminder of the importance of trusting God's plan and the consequences of human expediency.

Transcript

"Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had a handmaid, an Egyptian, whose name was Hagar." -- Genesis 16:1.

We none of us know all that is involved when we tear ourselves from the familiar scenes of our Harans to follow God into the lands of separation which lie beyond the river. The separated life cannot be an easy one. We may dimly guess this as we step out into the untried and unknown; but God graciously veils from our eyes that which would needlessly startle and daunt us; unfolding to us His requirements, only as we are able to bear them.

The difficulties of the separated life arise, not from any arbitrary appointments of Divine Providence, but from the persistent manifestation of the self-life in its many Protean forms. It is absurd to say that it dies once for all in some early stage of the Christian life; and it is perilous to lead men to think so. When men think or boast that it is dead, it peeps out in their very assertions, and laughs at the success of its efforts to blind them to its presence. This is the masterpiece of its art: to cajole its dupes into thinking that it is dead. Bands of thieves always like to secure the insertion of a paragraph in the newspapers, announcing that they have left the neighborhood, because in the false security which is induced by the announcement, they are more able to carry out their plans of pillage.

We say, in the first moments of consecration, that we are eager, not only to be reckoned dead in the sight of God, so far as our self-life is concerned, but to be dead. And if we really mean what we say, God undertakes the work, first of revealing the insidious presence of the self-life where we had least expected it, and then of nailing it in bitter suffering to the cross of a painful death. O ye who know something of the analysis of your inner life, do not your hearts bear witness that, as the light of heaven breaks with glowing glory on your souls, it reveals unexpected glimpses into the insidious workings of self? -- so much so that you are driven to claim, with no bated breath: first, Divine forgiveness for harboring such a traitor; and then, the interposition of Divine grace to mete out that death which is the only condition of growth and blessedness.

There is here a very startling manifestation of the tenacity with which Abraham's self-life still survived. We might have expected that by this time it had been extinguished: the long waiting of ten slow-moving years: the repeated promises of God: the habit of contact with God Himself -- all this had surely been enough to eradicate and burn out all confidence in the flesh; all trust in the activities of the self-life; all desire to help himself to the realization of the promises of God. Surely, now, this much-tried man will wait until, in His own time and way, God shall do as He has said. Abraham would not take a shoe-latchet, or a thread, from the King of Sodom, because he was so sure that God would GIVE him all the land. Nor was he disappointed: when God said, "I am thy exceeding great reward." And similarly we might have expected that he would have strenuously resisted every endeavor to induce him to realize for himself God's promise about his seed. Surely he will wait meekly and quietly for God to fulfil His own word, by means best known to Himself.

Instead of this he listened to THE REASONING OF EXPEDIENCY, which happened to chime in with his own thoughts, and sought to gratify the promptings of his spirit by doing something to secure the result of which God had spoken. Simple-hearted faith waits for God to unfold His purpose, sure that He will not fail. But mistrust, reacting on the self-life, leads us to take matters into our own hands -- even as Saul did, when he took upon himself to offer sacrifice, without awaiting the arrival of Samuel.

(1) THE QUARTER WHENCE THESE REASONINGS CAME

"Sarai said unto Abram." Poor Sarah! She had not had her husband's advantages. When he had been standing in fellowship with God, she had been quietly pursuing the routine of household duty, pondering many things.

It was clear that Abraham should have a son; but it was not definitely said by God that the child would be hers. Abraham was a strict monogamist; but the laxer notions of those days warranted the filling of the harem with others, who occupied an inferior rank to that of the principal wife, and whose children, according to common practice, were reckoned as if they were her own. Why should not her husband fall in with those laxer notions of the marriage vow? Why should he not marry the slave-girl, whom they had either purchased in an Egyptian slave market, or acquired amongst the other gifts with which Pharaoh had sent them away?

It was an heroic sacrifice for her to make. She was willing to forego a woman's dearest prerogative; to put another in her own place; and to surrender a position to which she had a perfect right to cling, even though it seemed to clash with the direct promise of God. But her love to Abraham; her despair of having a child of her own; and her inability to conceive of God fulfilling His word by other than natural means -- all these things combined to make the proposal from which, in another aspect, her wifely nature must have shrunk.

Love in Sarah did violence to love.

No one else could have approached Abraham with such a proposition, with the slightest hope of success. But when Sarah made it, the case was altered. The suggestion might have flitted across his own mind, in his weaker moments, only to be instantly rejected and put aside, as doing a grievous wrong to his faithful wife. But now, as it emanated from her, there seemed less fear of it. It was supported by the susceptibilities of natural instinct. It was consistent with the whisperings of doubt. It seemed to be a likely expedient for realizing God's promise. And without demur, or reference to God, he fell in with the proposal. "Abram hearkened to the voice of Sarai."

It is always hard to resist temptation when it appeals to natural instinct or to distrustful fear. At such an hour, if the Savior be not our Keeper, there is small hope of our being able to resist the double assault. But the temptation is still more perilous when it is presented, not by some repellent fiend, but by some object of our love; who, like Sarah, has been the partner of our pilgrimage, and who is willing to sacrifice all in order to obtain a blessing which God has promised, but has not yet bestowed.

We should be exceedingly careful before acting on the suggestions of any who are not as advanced as we are in the Divine life. What may seem right to them may be terribly wrong for us. And we should be especially careful to criticize and weigh any proposals which harmonize completely with the tendencies of our self-life. "If the wife of thy bosom, or thy friend, which is as thine own soul, entice thee secretly... thou shalt not consent unto him, nor hearken unto him; neither shall thine eye pity him, neither shalt thou spare" (Deuteronomy 13:6-8). But does not the response of the soul to such suggestions indicate how far the self-life is from being dead.

(2) THE SORROWS TO WHICH THEY LED

As soon as the end was obtained, the results, like a crop of nettles, began to appear in that home, which had been the abode of purity and bliss; but which was not destined to be the scene of discord. Raised into a position of rivalry with Sarah, and expectant of giving the long-desired son to Abraham, and a young master to the camp, Hagar despised her childless mistress, and took no pains to conceal her contempt.

This was more than Sarah could endure. It was easier to make one heroic act of self-sacrifice, than to bear each day the insolent carriage of the maid whom she had herself exalted to this position. Nor was she reasonable in her irritation; instead of assuming the responsibility of having brought about the untoward event, so fraught with misery to herself, she passionately upbraided her husband, saying: "My wrong be upon thee: the Lord judge between me and thee" (Genesis 16:5).

How true this is to human nature! We take one false step, unsanctioned by God; and when we begin to discover our mistake, we give way to outbursts of wounded pride. But instead of chiding ourselves, we turn upon others, whom we may have instigated to take the wrong course, and we bitterly reproach them for wrongs of which they at most were only instruments, whilst we were the final cause.

Out of this fleshly expedient sprang many sorrows. Sorrow to Sarah, who on this occasion, as afterwards, must have drunk to the dregs the cup of bitter gall; of jealousy and wounded pride; of hate and malice, which always destroy peace and joy in the nature, from which they stream as the fiery lava torrents from a volcanic crater. Sorrow to Hagar, driven forth as an exile from the home of which she had dreamt to become the mistress, and to which she had thought herself essential. Ah, bitter disappointment! Sorrow to Abraham, loth to part with one who, to all human appearance, would now become the mother of the child

who should bless his life: stung, moreover, as he was, by the unwonted bitterness of his wife's reproaches.

If any should read these words who are tempted to use any expedients of human devising for the attainment of ends, which in themselves may be quite legitimate, let them stand still, and take to heart the teachings of this narrative. For, as surely as God reigns, shall every selfish expedient involve us in unutterable and heartrending sorrow. "From this time shalt thou have wars."

(3) THE VICTIM WHOSE LIFE-COURSE WAS SO LARGELY INVOLVED

We cannot be surprised at the insolent bearing of the untutored slave-girl. It was only what might have been expected. But we mourn to see in her only one of myriads who have been sacrificed to the whim or passion, to the expediency or selfishness, of men. Innocent and light-hearted, she might have been the devoted wife of some man in her own station and the mother of a happy family. But, taken as she was from her true station, and put into a position in which she was a mother without being a lawful wife, what could her lot be but misery in the home in which she had no proper status, and at last in the exiled and homeless wanderings to which Sarah's bitter jealousy twice drove her: once for a time -- afterwards for ever?

Abraham, for the sake of the peace of his home, dared not interpose between his wife and her slave. "Behold," said he, "thy maid is in thy hand; do to her as it pleaseth thee." Not slow to act upon this implied consent, the irate mistress dealt so bitterly with the girl that she fled from her face, and took the road, trodden by the caravans, towards her native land.

"The angel of the Lord" (and here, for the first time, that significant expression is used, which is held by many to express some evident manifestation of the Son of God in angel-guise) "found her by a well of water" which was familiarly known in the days of Moses. There, worn, and weary, and lonely, she sat down to rest. How often does the Angel of the Lord still find us in our extremity! -- when we are running away from the post which was assigned to us; when we are evading the cross. And what questions could be more pertinent, whether to Hagar or to us: "Whence camest thou? and whither wilt thou go?" Reader, answer those two questions, ere thou readest further. What is thine origin? and what thy destiny?

Then there followed the distinct command, which applies to us evermore, "Return, and submit." The day would come when God Himself would open the door, and send Hagar out of that house (Genesis 21:12-14). But until that moment should come, after thirteen years had rolled away, she must return to the place which she had left, bearing her burden and fulfilling her duty as best she might. "Return, and submit."

We are all prone to act as Hagar did. If our lot is hard, and our cross is heavy, we start off in a fit of impatience and wounded pride. We shirk the discipline; we evade the yoke; we make our own way out of the difficulty. Ah! we shall never get right thus. Never! We must retrace our steps; we must meekly bend our necks under the yoke. We must accept the lot which God has ordained for us, even though it be the result of the cruelty and sin of others. We shall conquer by yielding. We shall escape by returning. We shall become free by offering ourselves to be bound. "Return, and submit." By and by, when the lesson is perfectly learnt, the prison-door will open of its own accord.

Meanwhile the heart of the prodigal is cheered by promise (16:10). The Angel of the Lord unfolds all the blessed results of obedience. And as the spirit considers these, it finds the homeward way no longer lined

by flints, but soft with flowers.

Nor is this all: but in addition to promise, there breaks on the soul the conception of One who lives and sees; who lives to avenge the wronged, and to defend the helpless; and who sees each tear and pang of the afflicted soul.

"Thou are a God that seeth." Not like those blind Egyptian idols that stare with stony gaze across the desert: having eyes, though they see not. It was a new thought to the untutored slave-girl; it is familiar enough to us. And yet we might find new depths of meaning in life and duty, if every moment were spent in that habitual realization of these words. Let us look after Him that seeth us. Let us often stay the whirr of life's shuttles to say softly to ourselves, "God is here; God is near; God sees -- He will provide; He will defend; He will avenge." "The eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to show Himself strong in the behalf of them whose heart is perfect toward Him" (2 Chronicles 16:9, Zechariah 4:10).

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