

# Distress of Abraham

by W.F. Anderson

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*The sermon reflects on Hagar's distress and God's compassionate response, urging the church to minister to the marginalized.*

**Duration:** 36:03

**Scripture:** Genesis 12:3, Matthew 5:3, Matthew 10:8, John 15:18

**Topics:** "Social Justice", "Gods Character"

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## Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes that Israel was not God's ultimate goal, but rather a means for God to reach the world. The speaker highlights the importance of having a ministry to the poor and marginalized, as this reflects the character of God. The story of Hagar, a slave girl who became Abraham's concubine, is used as an example of someone who was considered a lowly 'barrel' in society but was still used by God for His purposes. The speaker encourages listeners to recognize the value and potential in all people, regardless of their social status.

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## Transcript

I thought it would be better to do it at night, and then at day time. Plus, in fact, it's nice to be back again. I'm going to get a number of friends, and meet them during this retreat.

Some that I've only seen once in the last two years, twenty-five years. Some I haven't seen at all in a couple of twenty-five years. And what amazes me is how these folks have aged.

All right. And here we are. I hope some of this is a good time to get on the floor.

You understand, of course, that I'm only here the 12th of this month, all of a sudden you're here all week. But I've got the chance of asking you to spend some time with me again, in very, very happy years, and proud of you. And during the times that we're sharing a word of thought together, or daily, I'd like to look at various pictures, passages, that tell us the story of people who are in deep trouble.

Rumi's album, like Eliza, who has suicide attacks, and that guy named Joe, with his peace distress. And perhaps pick up on a few human sentiments. If you do not have any peace distress in your own life, then perhaps you can at least read the Bible, and read some of the passages that you can help.

But I'd like to begin this morning by looking at Genesis, chapter 16, and its short chapter, called, I believe, the whole chapter. Genesis, chapter 16. My main desire today is to make this quote a bit different from the

translation of this poem.

While parents loved more than their children, they had an assistant handmaid whose name was Eliza. And Sarah said to Eliza, Behold now, the Lord has prevented me from bearing children. So unto my maid, it may be that I shall bring children my birth.

And Abram heard this in the voice of Sarah. For after Abram had dwelt ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarah, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her maid, and gave her to Abram, her husband, as a wife. And he named her Hagar, and she conceived.

And when she saw that she was conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress. And Sarah said to Abram, May the Lord come to me beyond you. I gave my maid your embrace, and when she saw that she was conceived, she looked on me with contempt.

May the Lord judge between you and me. And Abram said to Sarah, Behold, you have made me your father. Then Sarah sat possibly with her, and she said unto him, The angel of the Lord has found her by a stream of water in the wilderness, and has turned her on the way to Sheol.

And he said, Hey God, hear this, Sarah, I am. Where have you come from? He said, I am fleeing from my little Sarah. The angel of the Lord said to her, Return to your mistress and submit to her.

The angel of the Lord also said to her, I was so greatly mocked while you were despondent, that they commenced to humble pornography. And the angel of the Lord said to her, Behold, you are with child and forbear of time. And he called his name Ishmael on her, because the Lord hath given him evil afflictions.

He shall be a wild ass of a man, and be prone against every man, and every man prone against him. And he shall dwell over her against all who see him. So she called the name of the Lord, which he spoke to her, thou art a God of healing.

For she said, Have I really seen God, and have I known the light after seeing him? Now, that particular Hebrew translation is open to all sorts of translations that he has taken, and we'll just let that go, and if we have time we'll deal with it as we get to it. Therefore, the world is called Jerusalem, it lies between Shadash and Zerub. Probably many of us, every time we hear the song, His Eye is on the Sparrow, since no one could ever walk or sing that, that beautiful, black, soft tune.

I suppose it's forever enshrined in my memory, the first singing of it, that His Eye is on the Sparrow. And all of us are aware of the biblical text from which it comes. Our Lord, in two gospel accounts, talks about sparrows, and God uses these sparrows in both Luke and Matthew.

Luke and Matthew tells us that two sparrows are sold for, let's say, a penny, a relatively worthless bird, two units to give any value. We only value what is rare. These sparrows are two units to give any value.

If you have a winter bird feeder, you go running to call your children to come see a sparrow feeding on that bird feeder, you wouldn't think of doing it. If I go out in my backyard in the morning and find a dead sparrow on some particular side, if it's a mothing bird or something like that, I'm a little more obsessed with that kind of a bird. I'd be incensed if the cats would prowl our neighborhood.

Curse my neighbors. If the cats would prowl my yard and terrible owner's wives to kill a mothing bird, pardon me, or some other rare bird, I'd be quite upset if it killed a sparrow the way I do. Sparrows are

simply part of the landscape.

Nobody really values them. In fact, our Lord would stand on that. I don't think he could have shown the worthlessness of sparrows any more than when he said, two sparrows are sold for a penny, five for two pennies.

If you buy four, a fifth is sold in three. Now, don't forget, he was talking from Palestine, and he was talking about Jewish merchants. Now, when you get a Jewish merchant to throw something in three, it can't be worth much.

In this anyway, our Lord could have said, they really have no value in the sense that five sparrows for two pennies. Then our Lord said, not one of them is forgotten by God, or not one of them falls to the ground without their having a body. Who notices the death of a sparrow? God does.

In fact, if I read the Scriptures correctly, God is much more likely to be the God of a sparrow than he is the God of meals. Now, he's the God of both, of course, but if I understand God correctly in the Scriptures, his natural tendency is to go to the sparrow rather than the eagle, to be identified with the sparrow. Now, our country is identified with the eagle.

What kind of a country would it be that had a sparrow for a national emblem? But, if I could also suggest an emblem for God, it would be the sparrow. I think, as we think about ourselves and we think about God, we confuse pomp with glory, and God isn't confused by those two terms. And the great men of our world, the natural rulers of our world, surround themselves with pomp because they have no glory.

Pomp consists of those externalappings that are temporal and artificial and manufactured that supposedly show up the greatness of the individual. Glory is the expression of what the individual is, and our natural rulers have no glory, so they have to get pomp. And we human beings are impressed by pomp and not by glory.

And when God reveals himself with pomp to human beings, it's not because that's a reflection of the greatness of God. That's the kind of stuff that impresses us, and God has to get our attention and when it's necessary to get human attention to surround himself with pomp, God can do it. But, he shouldn't think for a moment that when God takes on theappings of earthly splendor, that's when he credits it on.

God, the creator of the universe, God who exists forever, takes on theappings that belong to this world. That impresses us. That's no credit to God in the sense of who God is.

That's a condescension on God's part. No. God is the God of glory, and glory is the outshining of what the person is.

And we can see this, and you see the glorious God in Bethlehem's manger. That's glory. A vague, helpless child born in a stable.

That's the glory of God. You see the glory of God as he reaches into the tomb of Lazarus. You see the glory of God as he reaches out and touches a leper.

You see the glory of God in that bloodied figure on a cinder cross. That's the glory of God. God is the God who serves, not the God who likes to sit and match his feet and tell everybody what to do.

And that's why it's so puzzling for us to hear our Lord tell us to think of that in the coming season, they are going to sit at the table and he's going to wait on them. And we don't understand that because we've been confused half before. And if I understand the God of glory correctly, he's much more liable to be identified with a sparrow than with an eagle.

And that shouldn't puzzle us. Paul tells us in his first letter to the Corinthians that God didn't choose any mighty or noble or wise in this world. For whom does God identify himself? With the foolish, and the weak, and the despised.

And those were nothing in this world's power structure. That's where God naturally gravitates. That's the glory of God.

And that's where you find our Lord in his earthly ministry. Of course he put him around for those who belong to the power structure on their own level. But where did he find the enormous and common people that he loved? Surely his eye is on the sparrow.

I understand God correctly that God would expect it to be. His eye is on the sparrow. It seems to me if we are going to reflect the character of God in our own lives and ministries, we ought to have a great ministry to this world's sparrow.

We have left from wise men to sent hostages and salvaged nuns. But we ought to have a ministry to this world's sparrow. And any church is impoverished that doesn't have an active ministry among the poor.

My natural tendency is to gravitate to the noble and the wise and the mighty as opposed to the hope that some of it is going to rub off on me. But that only indicates how far removed I am from the vision of God. The poor, our Lord said, is like what you have with you always.

And whenever you will, the only problem is our will. And when you will, you may do what you will. Yes, his eye is on the sparrow.

And I think we're sitting in a black box with females that seem there to make that her song. His eye is on the sparrow. Agar was one of life's sparrows.

He was just some slave girl bought by the people's goods by Abrams. He'd come to him and made the sparrow his wife. That's the people's slave girl.

brought and sold and traded on the marketplace like cattle or furniture. And I said, hey, I'm not part of the power structure. I'm not part of the decision-making process even of Abrams' own household.

He was simply an efficient slave girl. That kind of thing is new, isn't it? Of course, in ancient history human beings were treated like pieces of good. But he was more than that, or worse than that.

He became Abrams' concubine. And I suppose concubines are not exactly the right term, particularly in the culture in which Abrams came. Literature in that culture is revised, by the way, in the New Testament.

And we're aware culturally of this whole arrangement. And Abrams said, I would simply follow the standards of their own tribe when they made their alliances. It's probably not quite correct to say that Agar was Abrams' concubine.

But nevertheless, it shows us how helpless this girl was. She was not asked if she wanted to go to bed with Abrams. She was just told she had to.

She was not asked if she wanted to bear Abrams' child. She had to. She had no choice in that.

She was a piece of good. And he bargained and traded and bargained with you. And that wasn't all.

She became the center of a family conflict between Abrams and Farrah. Partly her own fault. Once she became pregnant, she despised her mistress.

And to read through the 16th chapter, what Farrah saw was that Abrams didn't know a thing about her. Abrams was aware of it, but didn't coerce her. And Farrah would continue to get the impression that he approved of her.

And then she would begin to wonder, naturally enough, if he did not prefer this younger girl to her. And maybe having a child by Hagar wasn't all duty on Abrams' part. And so she turned in viciousness on this girl.

Of course, on Abrams. He was ahead of his household. You should have done something about that situation.

You should not have allowed my handmaid to do that. And Abrams, like a weary husband, says, that's your handmaid. You do with her whatever you want with her.

And then all that pent-up jealousy and anger on Farrah's part was vented on Hagar, and she triggered a heart attack. And Hagar had no recourse. There was no one to whom she could appeal.

She couldn't appeal to Abrams. Even though Abrams was the father of the child she had within her, Sarah was Abrams' wife. Hagar was nothing but Sarah's slave.

And she had no court of appeal, no one to whom she could turn. And, finally, in desperation, she became a refugee. She fled.

And, obviously, where she was found by the angel of the Lord, she was on her way back to Egypt. From where she was brought, like a piece of good, that there was nothing she could have done in Egypt. What's a pregnant slave girl, who's a runaway, going to do when she gets back to Egypt? Remember Hagar, one of life's But, his eyes on the saddle, and we read that the angel of the Lord found her.

What grace and love on the heart of God! You're aware that this is quite the angel of the Lord which serves about five times as a defensive alone. He is one of the Old Testament designations of the appearance of God himself. That shows up in what Hagar had to say about the angel of the Lord who appeared to her.

And God came to Hagar. But, note what it says, that the angel of the Lord found her. She was not hunting God.

God was hunting her. She could get away from Abram's indifference, and she could get away from Sarah's cruelty, but she could not get away from God's love. And the angel of the Lord found her.

God himself came to Hagar. Now, look, the angel God of Abram, and later on, Isaac and Joseph is the God of Hagar. Don't ever forget that.

I think we misread our Bibles so often. I do. I see the stream of Biblical revelation which God gave to the nation of Israel.

I have a tendency to see that as the end rather than the mean. And when God revealed Himself to Israel, God was only choosing a channel, not a goal, a channel. Israel wasn't the end, but the mean.

God's goal was the world. He had to have a channel through whom to reach the world. He had to have some family, some nation into which His son could be born, and Israel was that family and nation.

But they were never God's goal, they were God's mean. And what I have in this Scripture, in the Old Testament particularly, is the record of God's working with the channel, the mean. And I can read that as though that was the goal in the end, and it isn't.

And I have a tendency to put Israel, God's chosen people, in a position God never intended them to have. I tend to see them as the end of God's feelings instead of the means of God's feelings. But fortunately in the Old Testament, you find these different people outside the Messianic line who know God, to whom God has endeared Himself.

And fortunately you read God's self-revelation to Israel at Sinai in the 19th chapter of Exodus. He wanted them to be a kingdom of priests, and priests were those who mediate God to others, and God never intended them to keep that revelation to themselves as it would be a means of channels. And God is not just the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Simply because we are shut up to the Biblical revelation that God gave to Israel, we forget that He is the God of Hagar. God's eye was on the Pharaoh. But more than that, I think God did her a signal of honor in this passage.

He holds her to her responsibility. Return to your mistress and submit to her. When God faces us with our responsibility, He does us a tremendous honor.

He treats us seriously as human beings, capable of meeting that responsibility. And if God says you go back and face that responsibility, it means that God is going to give her the ability to do it. She fled from that responsibility once.

God says you go back there. And if God sends her back, He will give her the ability to meet her responsibility. Too often, I'm like the individual in the parable of the talents.

I knew you were a hard master. You reek where you haven't sown. God never reeks where He hasn't sown.

And if God wants anything out of our lives, it's because He has already put the seed there. He never reeks where He hasn't sown. And He is not demanding from Hagar what He Himself hasn't supplied for her.

The third evidence of God's great love for this woman is in the name that He gave the child to be born, Ishmael. It means God hears. And note what the angel says, God has heard your affliction.

Now, briefly, the description of Ishmael as a wild ass of a man would be as the light to Hagar. What God is saying to Hagar is, your son is never going to share your slavery. He'll fight his way free.

And if Hagar has to spend the rest of her life as a slave girl, she's going to delight that her son never will. She didn't, of course, but she would delight that her son never would. She's going to be a wild ass of a man with his hand against every man and every man's hand against him.

Nobody is going to make a slave out of your son. And the anguish of her own slavery would make her delight in the freedom that her son would. But Ishmael means God here. It means that the Lord said, God has heard your affliction.

Now, notice, he does not say, God has heard your cry. I don't doubt that Hagar may have cried to the God she had come to hear about in Abram's household. Perhaps hadn't seen too much of in the behavior of Abram and Sarah.

At least she had heard about him. But there's nothing about her cry. God has heard your affliction, because his eye is on the Pharaoh.

And so you get sometimes in life to that point in Romans, chapter 8, where you don't know what to pray for as you are. But, God hears our affliction. When the situation is such, you can't put words to it.

You don't know what to pray for. You don't know how to pray. You only get before God and groan, God has heard your affliction.

Now, God has not promised to exempt us from affliction. We share the common lot of the human race. We live in a human race crippled by sin, and we live in a world that physically has been cursed because of sin.

And God has not promised his people immunity from affliction. It may be our lot in life, because of the country in which we live, the money that we have keeps away from us a great deal that other people have nothing to shield themselves from. And if we, for one moment, think it's because we are spiritual, or God has special favor for us, and those people have to suffer somehow because they deserve it, then God has to We have made a God of our goals.

What delivers us is our bank accounts and our ability to live in the suburbs. And we're not worshiping God. We're worshiping the product of our own middle-class society.

And it's only because we have isolated ourselves from other people who don't have that protective wall, and we have never sat down and suffered with them, that we get the idea that God somehow has promised to protect us from these things. And we read the book of Proverbs as though it were a book of promises instead of a book of Proverbs. It's not a book of promises.

It's a book of Proverbs. And don't turn Proverbs into promises. They're not promises, they're Proverbs.

They're the distillation of the wisdom of men who observed life under God. But don't you ever forget, and you can read this right in the book of Proverbs, that those situations depend upon a godly king on the throne of Israel. And when there's a godless king on the throne of Israel, all bets are off.

And the righteous man is not going to prosper. He's the one that's going to get it in the neck when a godless king sits on the throne of Israel. God has not promised us deliverance from affliction simply because we are Christians.

God has not promised to throw a wall around us and our family simply because we are Christians. God has heard your affliction and we are not exempt. And lastly, in this chapter, it's the name that this dear woman gives to God.

You've seen it in the text many, many times, how God sees you. It's the warped Christianity that puts that on the kitchen wall to control the children. If anything was ever ripped out of context, it's to use this verse for that purpose.

Remember, God is watching you when you do what is bad. Now, what kind of a god do you think your children think about when they think about God? The same kind C.S. Lewis reports on the child who said God is somebody who is sitting up in heaven watching to see if anybody is having a good time and putting a stop to it. The God who sees in Genesis chapter 16 is not a God of judgment, but a God of grace.

It's not God who is watching for our sins, but God in compassion and love sees us where we are. And his heart goes out to us. When God came to Moses ready to deliver the people of Israel, God said to Moses, I have seen the affliction of my people.

And God's heart goes out to people when he himself cannot or, for other reasons, will not do anything about it. But God still sees us. And we think of the generation that came out of Egypt in the miraculous deliverance of the Passover and the Red Sea.

Have you ever thought of the generations that died under the lash of the Taskmaster? Was God indifferent to them? Had God not seen their afflictions? Not all of us are going to go through the Red Sea. Some of us are going to die under the lash of the Taskmaster in Egypt. But God sees.

And he has not obligated himself to straighten everything out in this world, in our lifetime. God sees. And Hagar could have had reason to question that.

Where were you, God, when I was being bought and sold like a piece of good? Where were you, God, when I was forced to go to bed with Ava? Where were you, God, when Sarai was treating me harshly and making life a hellhole for me? Where were you? Now she knows God sees. And he was not indifferent as she went through all that suffering. He was not indifferent to the inhumane treatment that she received.

But this is not the Day of Judgment. And when we ask God to straighten everything out, either in our own lives, or in our family's lives, or in the world, I don't think we would be prepared for the answer. What we're asking for is the Day of Judgment.

But God sees. And he is not indifferent. And so you find those words that Peter quotes, the eye of the Lord, the eye of is upon the righteous, and his ear is open to their cry.

The faith of the Lord is against them that do evil. Now, he hears. It does not mean he is always going to do what we ask.

But perhaps for us now, it is enough to know that he hears. And as the psalmist could write, as God could say through the psalmist, I will guide thee with mine eye upon thee. And I think God is indicating the deepest interest in each one of us is his eye is on her.

Take her in your affliction, in your distress, in your running away from home. God sees her. And the living God came to her.

And with that, she could go back to Sarai, her mistress. God may not change our circumstance. God may not correct our problems.

God may not directly answer anguished prayers that have gone up for years. But God sees us. He will come to us.

And he will go with us. Would you rather have your

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