

The Life of Abraham - Part 5

by W.F. Anderson

God's compassion and dignity are shown towards Hagar, a powerless slave girl, and He promises to hear her distress and provide for her and her child, Ishmael.

Scripture: Genesis 16:1-3, Genesis 16:13, Matthew 6:33, John 4:24, John 11:25, John 20:16

Topics: "Abrahamic Covenant", "Faith And Obedience"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker discusses the value of sparrows and how they are often overlooked. The speaker also highlights how the Bible accurately reflects the culture of the Near East, particularly in the treatment of servants as possessions. The sermon then shifts to discussing the biography of the Lord, emphasizing that with God, all things are possible. Finally, the speaker turns to the book of Genesis, specifically chapter 16, where Sarah suggests that Abram have a child with her Egyptian maid, Hagar. Abram agrees, and Hagar becomes his wife.

Transcript

These are more biographical than expositional, but I have found them very, very helpful. One is a rewriting of an old book, Harry Ironside's biography, Redeemed of the Lord. If you've never read it, please get it.

I remember the real encouragement this was to me as a much younger man. The faithfulness of God in this man's life and how God used him was a tremendous encouragement to me. It's been updated, rewritten some by Schuyler English, but Harry Ironside's biography, Ordained of the Lord.

Billy Graham defined a theologian as someone who takes a simple biblical truth and makes it very difficult. Harry Ironside had the gift of taking very difficult truth and making it very simple. One of the things I thank God for is that I had the privilege of hearing him just shortly before his death.

And I'll never forget it, never. I remember his speaking in a very large auditorium. And he admitted at the time that he couldn't see beyond the front row, his eyes were so bad.

He was still trying to do public reading himself, but he was going through 1 John. And I was sitting down toward the front. And as he read 1 John, what intrigued me was his Bible was upside down.

Didn't make any difference, he knew it all by heart. He was just reading it right off as though he were really reading it. But it was just memorized.

That was all. It was a beautiful, beautiful exposition. The other is Corrie Ten Boom's story, The Hiding Place.

If you haven't read it, by all means get it. I still think her sister Betsy never really existed. Betsy was just too much of a saint to be real.

But it's a very humbling story as you read Corrie Ten Boom's story, The Hiding Place. Probably all of you have read this book. I'm probably pushing books that everybody has.

But if you haven't, please read this book, The Hiding Place. It's again in very, very difficult circumstances. The grace of God at work in people just like us.

Impossible? No, not with God it isn't. And we're linked to God just as Corrie and Betsy and the rest of that family were linked to God. Now let's turn this morning to the book of Genesis again, this time chapter 16.

And as I said up at Believer's Conference about some sort of a study this past summer, those of you folks from St. Louis, Mignon, Ruth, you can go to sleep. And Bernice, no, you got the tapes, didn't you? You can go to sleep too. All right, Genesis chapter 16.

Let's begin reading at verse 1. Now Sarai Abram's wife bore him no children. She had an Egyptian maid whose name was Hagar. And Sarai said to Abram, Behold now, the Lord has prevented me from bearing children.

Go into my maid. It may be that I shall obtain children by her. And Abram hearkened to the voice of Sarai.

So after Abram had dwelt ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her maid, and gave her to Abram, her husband, as a wife. And he went into Hagar, and she conceived. And when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress.

And Sarai said to Abram, May the wrong done to me be on you. I gave my maid to your embrace, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt. May the Lord judge between you and me.

But Abram said to Sarai, Behold, your maid is in your power. Do to her as you please. Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she fled from her.

The angel of the Lord found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to shore. And he said, Hagar, maid of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going? She said, I am fleeing from my mistress Sarai. 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 will so greatly multiply your descendants that they cannot be numbered from multitude. And the angel of the Lord said to her, Behold, you are with child and shall bear a son. You shall call his name Ishmael, because the Lord has given heed to your affliction.

He shall be a wild ass of a man, his hand against every man, and every man's hand against him. And he shall dwell over against all his kinsmen. So she called the name of the Lord who spoke to her.

Now the literal translation is, Thou art a God of seeing. But what did Hagar mean by that? Thou God seest me, or thou art a God who allows himself to be seen? I think in the whole context, I prefer the thou God,

the God that sees me. And I think this is what she had in mind.

For she said, Have I really seen God? Or has God really seen me? Therefore the well was called Bir-le-hei-roi. It lies between Kadesh and Bereth. And Hagar bore Abram a son.

And Abram called the name of his son, whom Hagar bore Ishmael. Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram. Some of us can never think of the black gospel singer, Ethel Waters, without thinking of the song His Eyes on the Sparrow.

I myself am thrilled to hear her sing that on some of Billy Graham's appearances on TV. Her expressiveness, her delight, her joy in Jesus Christ come through so clearly as she sings that, His Eyes on the Sparrow. I think it's rather fitting that it's a black woman who has made that song her trademark.

Sparrows, sure. Our Lord talked about them, didn't he? He talked about two sparrows being sold for a penny in Matthew. In Luke he says you can get five for two pennies.

Shopkeeper always looking to make money will throw in an extra sparrow if you buy four. You end up with five for the price of four. And our Lord is indicating how common and how unvalued sparrows were and are in our day.

Who thinks about sparrows as being valuable? We've got a winter bird feeder that our kids hang up out in our yard right outside the kitchen window. We bought a book to try to identify all the kinds of birds that flock to it in the winter time. Though this winter I'm buying me a BB gun to rid me of some cats that are keeping the birds away this year.

But anyhow, we rush to this book to identify all these different beautifully colored birds that come in the winter time. And one of us is always calling the rest of the family to the window to see some new species or some new beautiful bird that we haven't seen before. I don't recall anybody ever raising a cry of delight and calling the rest of the family when the sparrows are feeding.

And if I go out in the morning and walk through the yard and find a dead sparrow, I just kick it aside. If it's a dead mockingbird, I say, oh no. What a tragedy.

We have too few mockingbirds, such beautiful songsters, but sparrows, who cares? And yet our Lord Jesus said, not a sparrow falls to the ground, that sparrow that I kick aside, not a sparrow falls to the ground without your heavenly Father. And in Luke's account, he says to his disciples, you are of more value than many sparrows. But the sparrows are the useless birds, there's so many of them, and the completely unnoticed birds.

That's why I think it's quite appropriate that a black woman, as made as her trademark, his eye is on the sparrow. Well, Hagar was one of life's sparrows in the story of Abraham. I want to look first, and this story in chapter 16 is primarily about Hagar, though Abraham's involved in it, and he doesn't show up to the best of advantage in chapter 16, but the story is about Hagar.

And I want to look first at her condition here in the 16th chapter. And there are several things about this woman, Hagar, that I think we sometimes overlook. We don't really see what's going on.

Obviously, Hagar was a slave girl, bought in Egypt, or given to Abraham as a slave girl for his wife in the time when the Pharaoh had taken Sarai to be his wife, taken her into his harem. Be that as it may, she

was a slave girl. And in the culture of the Near East in the days of Abraham, slaves were simply pieces of goods to be bought and sold like any other piece of goods.

Interesting is the Bible reflects the culture of the Near East so accurately. When Abraham came up out of Egypt, and the list of his riches is given, menservants and maidservants are sandwiched in between the cattle and the other animals and the possessions, because that's the way they were treated. And Abraham was a product of his own culture.

And here was a human being who was treated just like cattle. You bought them for their usefulness, and you sold them when you no longer needed them. And they came into your life and out of your life just like a piece of furniture.

And if you saw the TV production of the book Roots, you've got a graphic picture of what it was like in our own country to be a slave a couple of hundred years ago. Just a piece of chattel property. And that was Hagar.

She had nothing to say about her own future or her own present condition. And nobody would think of considering her. Would you go talk to your dog about changing jobs or making a move that's going to affect his life? You consult with him? You ask your dog how he's going to like it if you sell this house and buy another one? Do you ask him, are you going to be happy with a smaller yard to run in when we move? He has no say in the matter.

And neither did Hagar. She was a slave girl. Just a piece of property.

And she was totally controlled by her mistress, Sarai. And that's why Abram says, she's your slave, you do what you want to. Do whatever pleases you.

And on this occasion, it pleased Sarai to treat her harshly. And Abram wouldn't lift a finger to stop that because she was Sarai's slave girl and Sarai could do with her what she wanted to. And Abram wouldn't stop it.

Because that's the way you're supposed to treat a slave. You do what you want to with them. Now put yourself in Hagar's place.

Never mind Sarai's place. We all want to be Abrahams and Sarais. Put yourself in Hagar's place.

She was a human being too with something of the image and likeness of God still in her as both Genesis and James remind us. But she was that slave girl controlled totally by her mistress. But she was more than that here in this chapter.

She became a concubine. It was a typical Near Eastern pattern. Writings from the Near East that have come down from the same period of time.

It's a common arrangement. In fact, in some marriage documents the wife is commanded to provide a slave girl for her husband if she herself cannot bear children. And the first child, first male child born to that slave girl is not the slave girl.

It belongs to her mistress. And that's what Sarai is saying here. It may be that Hagar can bear you.

Really bear me a son. That son's going to be mine. It's not going to be Hagar's.

Hagar is not a wife. She's a concubine. She is still Sarai's slave.

And the child born to Hagar is not Hagar. It's Sarai. And nobody asks Hagar, do you want to go to bed with Abram? Do you want to be his concubine? Nobody asks her that.

And regardless of what her feelings are in the matter, she has no choice. And one day Sarai comes to Hagar and says, you're going to be Abram's concubine. She isn't asked if she wants it.

She's just told you're going to be Abram's concubine. And nobody comes to Hagar and says, would you like to keep your own child? Would you like to hold in your own arms the child you were born into this world? Would you like to nurse that child? Would you like to have that child running around your feet as he grows up? Would you like to have that child look up at you and say mother? Nobody asks her that. You can't have your own child.

That's my child. And when that child learns to say mother, it will not be addressing Hagar, it will be addressing Sarai. And all the while, the intent was Hagar, you will still serve me day in and day out.

You will see your own flesh and blood calling me mother. And you'll have to live that way. And nobody asks you whether you like it or not.

And that was Hagar. But more than that, she became the center of conflict in this family. The difficulty between Abram and Sarai and it centered all around Hagar.

Because what Hagar did in looking with contempt upon her mistress Sarai was she assumed the position of a second wife, not a concubine. And she began to lord it over Sarai as though Hagar were a second wife. And there were provisions in the laws of the Near East in those days for just such a situation.

And a concubine who dared to do that was immediately to be reduced to the position of a slave again. She was not allowed to take that kind of a position that Hagar had taken here. And so she became a real threat to Hagar.

I think there's more than that involved. While all this was going on, Abram has said nothing. And Sarai comes back to him and says, Hey, you've been letting this thing go on right in our household.

You have no business letting it go on like that. You should never have let Hagar treat me that way. She's not a second wife.

She's a concubine. And Abram, of course, acting as if he didn't know all this was going on. Maybe he didn't.

But it begins to raise suspicions in Sarai's mind. Maybe Abram enjoyed the relationship more than I suspected. Hagar's a younger woman than I. Maybe it wasn't so much a matter of duty on Abram's part.

And so she flies off the handle at Abram. And how would you like to be in that position as Abram? You've got these two women fighting in your own tents. And here one of them is coming to you dinning it all into your ears.

And Abram, no, you just go do what you want with her. She's your slave. And finally, her condition, Hagar became a refugee.

Not only a slave, but a dispossessed person. She couldn't stand this harsh treatment any longer. And she flees.

And she's on her way back to Egypt, her home country. She never gets there, of course. But she becomes a refugee.

And in the Near East of that day, there would be no more pitiable person than a runaway slave without any rights, without any protection. She's out from under the protection of Abram's household. She's fair game for anybody.

And she's a lone woman, defenseless, on her way back to Egypt. And that's Hagar. That's her condition.

But there's an addition to that, as you see in the 16th chapter, there's God's compassion. And in the 16th chapter, the angel of the Lord appears to Hagar. That occurs five times in Genesis, and without looking, having time to look at all the contextual evidence where it does occur, I think all of us are aware that the angel of the Lord is an appearance of God Himself.

That occurs so often that it's quite obvious. So God Himself appears to Hagar out in the wilderness. And note the language.

The angel of the Lord found her. He was hunting for her. She wasn't hunting for him.

His eye is on the sparrow. And that poor, defenseless, slave girl without any rights, without any protection, is under the eye of God. The angel of the Lord found her.

She could run from the harshness of Sarai. She could run from the indifference of Abram. But she could not run from the love of God.

And God found her in that wilderness going down towards her. And what this tells me is the God of Abram is the God of Hagar. That foreign girl from Egypt who has no covenantal rights in the line of the Messiah, whose child is to be excluded from that Messianic line, God is still the God of Hagar.

He is no Jewish tribal deity. He is God who is rich to all that call upon him. He is the God of the Gentile as well as of the Jew.

He is the God of the powerless as well as the God of the powerful. He does not play favorites to the power structure of society. In fact, if the life of our Lord Jesus is any indication, God has a tendency to gravitate toward the powerless, not toward the powerful.

And God was not impressed by Abram's wealth nor his power. He was seeking out a desperate slave girl in deep need. And he met her there.

And the angel of the Lord addresses her. Yes, she's a slave girl. But the angel of God, again without going into all the details of it, gives her tremendous dignity.

And he questions, where have you come from and where are you going? And he instructs her, return to your mistress and submit to her. Treat Hagar with tremendous dignity. God is holding her responsible.

That's to treat a human being with dignity. All the talk in our society about the freedom of people to do what they want to without holding people responsible is not to honor human beings. It's to degrade them.

It's to make animals out of us. But to hold people responsible for their actions is to treat people with dignity. And the final judgment is God's acknowledgement of the worth of human beings.

He doesn't call dogs and cats and cows and horses to the judgment. He calls human beings to judgment. And it's God's final acknowledgement of the worth of human beings.

He holds them responsible for their actions. And that's what God does with Hagar. You are responsible to Sarai.

It does not mean God is putting his approval on the whole situation. But as G. H. Lang of England wrote years ago, God is the supreme realist. And God deals with what is there.

And God recognizes that's the way things are. I've got to work within that. You go back and you submit to Sarai.

There are other reasons for God doing that. But at least it's the acknowledgement of the value of this woman, Hagar. You are a human being.

I can't go back. Yes, you can. I can't submit to her.

Yes, you can. You can do it. And with God, all things are possible.

I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me, Paul says. But what he's talking about is what God wants him to do. Now, don't take that verse out and say, I can do anything you know.

Whatever God requires of us, we can do. Please, don't be like the man in the story of the talents. Hit it in the ground.

I knew you were a harsh and austere man gathering where you have not sown. What he's saying is, you demand of us what you don't supply. God is not like that.

God never reaps where he hasn't sown. God never demands where he hasn't given. God never expects of us what he himself does not enable us to do.

He is not that harsh taskmaster. He's not that kind of a master. And if he expects this of Hagar, it's because he will enable her to do it.

And she can do it. And the angel of the Lord treats her with tremendous dignity. But when he comes to her in this gracious appearance, there's a great promise.

He also said to her in verse 10, there's Ishmael to be born. And his name has real significance. You get that L on the end of it, the name for God.

Ishmael. And the meaning of it is God hears. God has heard, as the angel says to her, God has heard what, your prayers? No, that isn't what he said.

God has heard your distress. Had Hagar cried to God? No, there's no record of it here. But God heard her distress.

And the name of that child every time she mentioned it in all the years to come would remind her that God heard her distress. You remember when God was talking to Moses about delivering the people out of

Egypt? I have heard their groanings. That doesn't mean they were crying out to God.

But in their great distress, the endlessness of it, the hopelessness of it, God heard that. God heard that. You know, there are times when you simply can't pray.

Doesn't Paul talk about groanings which cannot be uttered? There are times when you simply can't pray. And God hears the distress. Inarticulate, God hears the distress.

What a lovely thing, that poor, dispossessed, powerless slave woman with no rights. Society treated her like a piece of goods. God heard her distress.

But there's more than that in the story. There's her response to this whole thing. I like the promise, before I get to that response, I like the promise that God made about Ishmael.

He's going to be a wild ass of a man, and I think her heart would leap in joy at that. I think her heart would leap in joy. His hand is going to be against every man, and every man's hand against him.

Without that, born into Abram's household, he would simply be another slave boy. And God is saying, No sir, no sir. Your son is not going to be another slave boy.

He's going to be a wild ass of a man. And that's the free creature. You can't tame him.

Nobody is going to break this donkey. He's going to be a wild ass of a man. And after her years of slavery, Hagar must have rejoiced at the sound of it.

Even though it's by the sword, he's going to be free. And nobody is going to treat my son the way they have treated me. Now you mothers understand that, don't you? You'll put up with anything, as long as it's for the benefit of your children.

As long as they can have a better life than you've had. And that's Hagar. Sure, I'll go back.

If my son can be free, I'll go back. And that's what God promised. Your son's going to be free.

He'll not be a slave. His hand will be against every man. Every man's hand against him.

That's all right, but he's going to be free. He's going to be free. And that was Ishmael.

But her response is beautiful. Note the name that she gives to God. Thou, God, seest me.

He is a God who reveals himself and who sees her distress. I like this. One of the loveliest names of God in the whole Bible came out of the lips of a poor slave girl.

Beautiful. Now men, do you want to hear about women's lips? Let's come over to the New Testament. One of the greatest theological statements about the nature of God that one goes back to again and again, particularly in conflict with various cults, is God is spirit.

And they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth. To whom was that revelation given? An adulterous Samaritan woman. One of the greatest theological statements in the Bible was given to an adulterous Samaritan woman.

And when we come to Easter, what's the text that rings in our ears? I am the resurrection and the life. To whom was that given? To Mary? No. No, no.

The sister in the household that we always look down on. She wasn't the Bible student. She cooked the meals.

Oh, of course, she got all excited about it on that one occasion. But you'd have difficulty drawing Martha into a Bible discussion. You wouldn't have any difficulty drawing Mary into a Bible discussion.

Martha was more comfortable in the kitchen than she was in the study. At least, so we always say. But it was to Martha, not to Mary, that Jesus said, I am the resurrection and the life.

And to whom did our Lord appear first on resurrection morning? One of the apostles? No. No. Mary of Magdalene.

Somehow His eye is on the sparrow. Sure, we like to be big soaring eagles. Wonderful.

But His eye is on the sparrow. And one of the greatest names of God comes out of an incident with a despised slave girl. And that text that's so often written up and framed, Thou God seest me.

Oh, is that ever misused. Oh, my goodness. That's put on the walls of homes to keep children in line.

Isn't it? Remember? When your mother and your father can't see you, God is watching. Thou God seest me. That's a very frowning text.

Frightens little kids. And so we teach them a chorus. Be careful little feet where you go.

Be careful little hands what you do. Why? God is watching. God is watching.

What kind of a God do you end up with when you put that kind of an emphasis on things? The kind of a God C.S. Lewis reports a little boy said. God, he figured out, was the kind of being who's watching for anybody having a good time and putting a stop to it. As though God is watching for our sins.

No, he's watching for our souls. Oh, he sees all that, but that's not the emphasis. When Hagar said that, Thou God seest me, it was in joy and delight that he did.

He saw her need. He saw her helplessness. He saw her powerlessness.

And for God to use that term, to see is to act. I have seen the affliction of my people and I am come to deliver them. We can see and do nothing.

God can't. We're like the priest and the Levite. We see the man in the ditch and we pass by on the other side.

God is like the Samaritan. When he sees, he's got to do something. And when Hagar says, Thou God seest me, it's with joy and delight she says it.

Not with fear and terror. God is picking out all my sins. But God sees my need.

His eye is on the sparrow and I know he watches me. It's a word of grace, not a word of judgment. And Peter says, The eye of the Lord is upon the righteous.

And his ear is open to their cry. The psalmist says, I will guide thee with mine eye. He's watching us in love and compassion.

He sees everything that happens to us and he meets our real needs. Hagar may have felt that her real need was to be free of Abram's household. But all I know, she had the seed of Abram in her and she was not going to carry that seed down to Egypt.

And she was not to think that this child born of her was to be the promised seed for which Abram was waiting. Nor was Abram to think that. And there were more important issues here than that Hagar should be a free woman to go down to Egypt.

More important issues than that. And she may think that her need was to be free of Sarai, but that wasn't her need yet. But God would meet her need.

Not what she thought her need was, but her need. God would meet that need. And I know in my own lifetime there are many things that I think God ought to have done for me.

Needs that I see. But God is all the while seeing the real need and dealing with those. Yes, thou God seest me.

And this is not yet the time when he's going to straighten everything out. That'll be the day of judgment. But he sees us.

And we may be lost in the power structures of our society. We may be those insignificant sparrows totally unnoticed by all the decision makers of the world. And as far as our society is concerned, they are no richer because we live and there'll be no poorer when we die.

But his eye is on the sparrow. And if he saw a poor slave girl driven out of Abram's house and met her need, he'll not shut his eyes to us. Now as I read the story of Hagar, I have a fresh appreciation for Ethel Waters and her singing of His Eye is on the Sparrow.

And I know, I know he watches me. And don't ever forget, he never goes to sleep. Let's pray.

Our Father, with a fresh sense of your goodness to us, of your care for us, of your unwearying watch over us, we give you thanks. Not one of us here this morning escapes your loving eye. You know all about us.

You see us where we are. You know all our circumstances and you care for us. Oh, for that we thank you.

We pray that today we may be able to live in the sheer delight of being loved by God. We pray in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

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