

Hagar

Genesis 16 - 25.

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Abraham had already received the promise of a seed; so, by faith in that promise (trusting God as the quickener of the dead), he was now standing in righteousness before Him. (Gen. 15.)

That promise, I may observe, had not mentioned Sarah in connection with the Seed, but there was strong intimation that she was to be the mother.

However, be this as it may, Sarah's suggestion to her husband at the opening of chapter 16 too clearly discloses the working of an unbelieving heart, and the principle of confidence in the flesh. For of course they measure each other. The more the simplicity of faith is surrendered and grace is refused, the law will either in its morality or religiousness be taken up.

For grace, or the promise, calls us out of ourselves, unto God and His resources. And Abraham had followed that call in Genesis 15. But now at the suggestion of Sarah he takes up himself again. He is back again in the flesh, or under the law, or becomes a dependent on his own resources. For these are all one and the same thing. Hagar is his confidence, and not the divine quickener of the dead.

This is very sad; but it is not destructive of his standing. Surely not. It betrays the bad mistrustful habit of the soul, and has to be rebuked and chastened, but Abraham is still the heir of God through righteousness by faith.

Very expressive, I judge all this to be, and very significant or typical also. For the law after this pattern entered through man's confidence in himself, Israel accepting this offer of it, and saying, "All that the Lord hath spoken we will do" (Ex. 19, 1*); as Hagar is now seated in Abraham's house through the same want of faith and, the same confidence in the flesh.

*And we see in Joshua 24 the same confidence persisted in after experience.

But there is much more of this same typical character. For Hagar's despising of her mistress is in the Lord's esteem highly out of place; and as He meets her in her wanderings, He knows her only as Sarah's maid, and sends her back with this injunction, "return to thy mistress, and submit thyself under her hand." She may get promises respecting the son that was to be born to her, but she is Sarah's maid still, and submission is her only duty. The law, too, has its hour. It may fill the house of God for a time, as Hagar and Hagar's seed now do the house of Abraham for fourteen years. But to the elect, or the heirs of promise, even the dispensation of the law still is, or was, only a servant. Sarah, likewise, may betray herself in other ways, in her undue impatience against Hagar, as well as in giving her to her husband, but still the relationship is unaffected by all this. Hagar is still and only Sarah's maid, and as such she must reside in the family as long as she is permitted.

All this is strong decided teaching, and teaching of mysteries, as I have said. For Hagar, as we know (Gal. 4), is the law of the old covenant, which, though it filled and formed the house of God for its hour, was but serving some great purpose of instruction or discipline to the heirs of promise. And all the time there was a great underplot, so to express it, in this mystic house of the patriarch. In a divine sense it was surely the chief thing. Ishmael is born and circumcised, and, being the only child and heir apparent, he becomes the object no doubt of daily solicitude. But with God Ishmael is but second. He

appears to be principal in the scene, but he is not really or divinely so. Accordingly neither he nor his mother is scarcely noticed by the Spirit or hand of God after this, while they reside in the house, till the due time for their dismissal comes. Abraham, through human or fleshy fondness, draws him forward for a moment under God's eye, and he is circumcised as any purchased slave would have been, but neither he nor his bondwoman mother is the Lord's object. The elect Abraham and Sarah, or persons and things connected with them, are his thoughts. His communications are with them, and his discipline spent upon them: they learn and experience their value in His esteem, and others are made to know it also. (Gen. 17 - 20.)

Is not this, in like manner, a word of instruction to us? Hagar and her child were in the house all this time. But Sarah and Abraham are God's objects. As again I may say, during the age of the law, the house of God was, it is true, manifested as under law, the law filled it with a material of its own workmanship, but there was all the while a hidden action of the Spirit with the elect — the elect in the house were really God's objects.

These two stages in the way of the Egyptian bondwoman are thus very significant. Her entrance into Abraham's house as the mother of his first child Ishmael, and then her residence there for a season, have this mystic sense in them. But these things do not dispose of the whole history. We have still to look at her dismissal from the house.

Her child grew up to boyhood, and was, as I have suggested, no doubt, the object of family concern. But the current which had long run underground, or was known only in the counsels and promises of God, must appear and assert its course. Grace and the covenant must have their way and become principal in the scene. And therefore in due time, yea at the very right moment, "when the fulness of the time had come," Isaac is born.

The appearance of such a child was a great era. And soon was it found that he was set for a sign that should be spoken against, as well as for the joy of the elect. Abraham makes a feast, but Ishmael mocks over the same event. Here was the revealing of hearts. One taunts what the other glories in. But Sarah is bolder still. She will not merely take part in Abraham's joy, but she is for judging the scorers. "Cast out the bondwoman and her son," says she. Here was another heart revealed, a great heart truly. Here was an energy of faith which far outdid even Abraham's. Abraham would personally and quietly enjoy the child of promise, but Sarah will not only do this, laughing with divine believing delight over him, but is for cleaning out by a summary dismissal all that would disturb his full unrivalled heirship of everything.

This was indeed great-hearted faith. This spoke the mind of God. (Gal. 4: 30.) This was interpreting the gift of God, the child of promise, aright. This was putting honour upon that gift as it well deserved. It was not a mother's fondness, but faith's boldness; for shall the gift of God be kept merely on a level, on the same floor as it were, with the fruit of human strength or the creatures of man's resources?

This great-hearted faith of Sarah is very encouraging, receiving too, as it does, the full and ready sanction of the Lord Himself. It is very happy to watch this. It is well when the soul can, with Abraham, rejoice over the accomplished counsels and promises of God. But it is better, when we can be so bold in the faith as with this joy to cast out from our hearts all spirit of bondage and fear, every fruit of nature and every confidence save in the sovereign and glorious resources of the living God — God of all grace and salvation as He is — when we can refuse to hear anything or to see anything that may hush or cloud that goodness and power of God by which He has brought Himself unspeakably near to our hearts.

From the presence of such a faith as this everything must retire and make room for God and His gift. Hagar is dismissed, and of course the mocking Ishmael. Sarah will have it so — faith, rather, will have it so. And so will God; and Abraham, let fondness and nature be as reluctant as they may, must have it so likewise.

What precious mysteries may our souls thus feed upon while they meditate on Hagar's introduction to the house, her residence in the house, and her dismissal from the house, of our father Abraham!

But I would now also, for a little, trace the results of the birth of Isaac, of the appearance of the child of promise in the house of Abraham.

1. The immediate fruit of this appearance of Isaac, as I have been observing, is the dismissal of Hagar and her child. And, as I also have observed, this is a mystery. "When faith came, we were no longer under a schoolmaster;" but the exhortation now is, "Stand fast in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made you free."

The Spirit of sonship displaces that of fear. There must be no room in the house for two children of such opposite tempers. Since Jesus had appeared, the elect stand in the righteousness of faith and wait for the hope it inspires (Gal. 5: 5), and fear and bondage depart.

2. The future fruit of this great mystic event is the covenant of peace between Abraham and the Gentiles, Abraham on that great occasion taking the lead, and soon afterwards owning, for the first time, the earth as a beautiful or millennial scene, and the Lord God as the everlasting God, or the Father of the millennial age. (Gen. 21.)

In this way the immediate and the final results of the appearance or birth of the child of the freewoman are exhibited. But there is more to be observed in the history down to Genesis 25. Another thing is incidentally shown also — the fortunes of the outcast child of the bondwoman.

At first he is all but dead. The provision with which he left Abraham's house is all spent, and he is cast entirely upon God. But under His provision he grows up and thrives, as a man of the wilderness. There he dwells and has his occupation, and the prophecies which went before on him (Gen. 16) were made good. But in the principle and taste of his mind he returns, as far as he can, to his mother's native land. She gets him an Egyptian wife.

All this is significant. For we know that Ishmael is, mystically, the children of "the Jerusalem that now is." (Gal. 4.) And quite after this pattern of Ishmael, is it now with the Jew; for the Jew (or the nation of Israel) since the day of his dismissal from the house of God, since he ceased to be owned of the Lord in the land of his fathers, has been kept alive by the peculiar hand or provision of God. A full end has been made of other nations but not of Israel, and never will. For so runs the promise: outcast that people are, but not destroyed. They have, it is true, gone back all they could to the flesh out of which by profession through circumcision they had come; they have in principle returned to Egypt, or found affinity with the ways of an uncircumcised world; but there they are to this day, kept by the present hand of God for the coming purposes of God, all their history marking the energies of a divine hand over them.

This is all significant: the wilderness of Ishmael is as much mystic ground as the land of Israel. But, further, during this growth of Ishmael in the wilderness, the house of God has been enjoying its liberty. Isaac has filled Abraham's and Sarah's heart with laughter. And all this liberty and joy was as much divine as the preservation of the life of Ishmael in the wilderness — the one betokening the Spirit, the other the hand of God. God sanctioned this joy. He would by no means have it otherwise.

And, blessed to tell it, it was a worshipping as well as a deep personal joy; for it could associate itself with any sacrifice. The father and the son, Abraham and Isaac, loved each other with the warmest affections, but at the bidding of the Lord they can go to the altar as the offerer and His Lamb. And it was also a joy that could dwell in thoughts of resurrection, and lay its objects in scenes beyond the grave. And it was holy jealousy as well. It refused all kindredness or Ishmael's affinities with the world. Genesis 22 - 24 exhibit these qualities in Abraham and Isaac, while Ishmael is growing up no better than an Egyptian in the desert. (Gen. 22 - 24.)

This is, I believe, all deeply significant. Is it not the picture of what we in this age ought to be — in a spirit of full gladness and liberty before our God, but also in a spirit of sacrifice, and in a spirit of separation from the world?

Finally, as I have already anticipated, in a little time the scene will change to glory or the kingdom. Abraham or Israel will be courted by the Gentiles and their kings — the earth will be beautified, or planted with groves again, and the altar of the everlasting or millennial God (see Gen. 21) will be raised, while a covenant of peace binds all the families of the earth together; as here at the close Abraham's seed, as by Keturah, are sent into distant lands, with gifts as from a father, though Isaac was at home the heir of his estate! (Gen. 25.)

"Witty inventions," surely, divine wisdom employs to teach our souls with joy and profit! J. G. B.