

A Meditation on Sexual Exploitation

The Gospel According to Abraham, Pt. 4

We're looking at the life of Abraham as it appears in the book of Genesis. And what's intriguing is three major world religions look to Abraham as the model for courageous living, authentic living, faithful living, but today we come to see, that whatever the *ultimate* reason Abraham triumphs, it's not because he is made of some kind of better material than we are.

Because in this narrative we see Abraham as a deeply flawed and very, very fallible human being. And that's putting it mildly! I have titled today's message "A Meditation on Sexual Exploitation" which is admittedly a doozy of a title...but it's a doozy of a story. This particular narrative should come with more trigger warnings than a Texas gun range on "free ammo day"! I'm just going to read it to you, but before I do, I will tell you that it's even worse than what you're going to hear. And once we're through the text I'll spend a little time explaining why that is.

Ok, let's read **Genesis 16:1–13** and then we're going to skip ahead to chapter 21 to see how the story resolves. *Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. But she had an Egyptian maidservant named Hagar; 2 so she said to Abram, "The LORD has kept me from having*

children. Go, sleep with my maidservant; perhaps I can build a family through her." Abram agreed to what Sarai said.

3 So after Abram had been living in Canaan 10 years, Sarai his wife took her Egyptian maidservant Hagar and gave her to her husband to be his wife. 4 He slept with Hagar, and she conceived. When she knew she was pregnant, she began to despise her mistress. 5 Then Sarai said to Abram, "You are responsible for the wrong I am suffering. I put my servant in your arms, and now that she knows she is pregnant, she despises me. May the LORD judge between you and me."

6 "Your servant is in your hands," Abram said. "Do with her whatever you think best." Then Sarai mistreated Hagar; so she fled from her. 7 The angel of the LORD found Hagar near a spring in the desert; it was the spring that is beside the road to Shur. 8 And he said, "Hagar, servant of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going?" "I'm running away from my mistress Sarai," she answered.

9 Then the angel of the LORD told her, "Go back to your mistress and submit to her." 10 The angel added, "I will so increase your descendants that they will be too numerous to count." 11 The angel of the LORD also said to her: "You are now with child and you will have a son. You shall name him Ishmael, for the LORD has heard of your misery. 12 He will be a wild donkey of a man; his hand will be against everyone and everyone's hand against him, and he will live in hostility toward all his brothers."

13 She gave this name to the LORD who spoke to her: "You are the God who sees me," for she said, "I have now seen the One who sees me."

Jumping down to **Genesis 21:14-21**, the baby has been born and now Sarai wants her gone.

14 Early the next morning Abraham took some food and a skin of water and gave them to Hagar. He set them on her shoulders and then sent her off with the boy. She went on her way and wandered in the desert of Beersheba. 15 When the water in the skin was gone, she put the boy under one of the bushes.

16 Then she went off and sat down nearby, about a bowshot away, for she thought, "I cannot watch the boy die." And as she sat there nearby, she began to sob. 17 God heard the boy crying, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, "What is the matter, Hagar? Do not be afraid; God has heard the boy crying as he lies there. 18 Lift the boy up and take him by the hand, for I will make him into a great nation."

19 Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. So she went and filled the skin with water and gave the boy a drink. 20 God was with the boy as he grew up. He lived in the desert and became an archer. 21 While he was living in the Desert of Paran, his mother got a wife for him from Egypt.

Ok, that's a bad story, but I'm here to tell you that it's actually a more brutal story than the English translation really lets you see. The English translation sort of "whitewashes" this and keeps you from seeing the rawness and the brutality of it. You know how we can use language to soften and spin hard truths. "I'm a freelance mobile pharmacist." Man, you're a corner drug dealer, who you fooling?

But even on the surface, this story is bad. In fact, some people are certainly going to look at a story like this and say, "What is this doing in the Bible? This is disgusting. This condones slavery. This demeans women. This is awful! *These* are the heroes of the faith are acting like this? This is confusing. This is offensive!" First of all, I hear you. And you're not wrong. But we're going to have to read it carefully, though, because it's true on the surface. It certainly looks like all that. But there's a greater truth below the surface. Which means we have to do some digging.

And because it's a story, it has characters. There are four characters really - not counting Ishmael, who is not exactly a character. You have an exploited slave, a barren woman, a stupid man, and a mysterious friend. And each one teaches us something, so let's look.

First of all we have The Exploited Slave. Now this is hard. This is hard! Verse 1 tells us what's going on. God has promised Abram and Sarai that He would bring salvation into the world through their descendants. And that means they have to have a son. They will have a son – that's what sparks the tension in chapter 21. But Verse 3 tells us they've been in Canaan for 10 years. No son.

And finally when Sarai says, “The Lord has kept me from having children. Go sleep with somebody else.” what she is doing is saying, “In spite of what you tell me, Abram, about God being for this child, that God is going to help me, I don't see it that way. I see God as opposing me. And therefore, let's do something else. Let's not wait for God anymore.” And what she suggests is not her own invention. She says, “Go, sleep with my maidservant; perhaps I can build a family through her.”

Now what she is suggesting was common, legal, and completely culturally acceptable. What she was saying is, “I have a maidservant. I will give you her as a kind of secondary wife.” You notice in v. 3 it says, “...*Sarai his wife took her Egyptian maidservant Hagar and gave her to her husband to be his wife.*” And if she got pregnant - which she did - the children of Hagar would be Sarai's children. And

that's why she is able to say legally, “...perhaps I can build a family through her.”

Now at this point, the English translation whitewashes things and keeps us from seeing the brutality of the situation. I've mentioned Robert Alter, who is professor of Hebrew Literature at Berkley, he's working on a painstaking translation of the Hebrew Bible that maintains the nature of the original cultural context. Here's what he says in his commentary on Genesis. He says, “The tradition of English versions that render this as ‘maid’ or ‘handmaiden’ imposes a misleading sense of European gentility on the sociology of the story. The point is that **Hagar belongs to Sarai as property**, and the ensuing complications of their relationship build on that fundamental fact.” (Alter, *Genesis*, 67.)

Do you see why he says the term “maidservant” is a euphemism that kind of whitewashes it? When you think of a maidservant, you think of someone who comes into the house and does the cooking and cleans up, and you pay. No. The reason Hagar's children would be Sarai's children is Hagar is *owned* by Sarai. The reason Hagar's children are Sarai's children is she is Sarai's *property*. And that means her *children* will be Sarai's property.

And if you think that's bad, it gets worse if we read it carefully. Look. It says in v.4, "*When she [Hagar] knew she was pregnant, she began to despise her mistress.*" That little word "despise" tells us a great deal. What happens now is because of what Sarai has done, everything gets complicated...*deeply* complicated. First of all, this woman who *was* just a subservient slave, *now* is getting a status inside the community because she is bearing Abram's child. She can no longer bring herself to just grovel before the mistress.

You know in Asian cultures, for example, eye contact is perceived differently than in the West, right? If you're an inferior, you don't look right in the eye of the superior. My guess is Hagar started looking Sarai right in the eye. So to say the *least*, Sarai would have had *deeply* ambivalent and conflicting feelings about the new bond of intimacy between her slave and her husband.

See, this is where, again, the English translation kind of hurts us a little bit. Sarai explodes to Abram and says, "You are responsible for the wrong ..." - which is kind of unfair, since it was her idea - but then she says, (v.5) "...*I put my servant in your arms...*" Well, that's not what it says in Hebrew. That's a euphemism the English translator puts in there, because literally it says, "I put my servant girl in your lap. I put my servant girl between your legs."

The reason she is using this *graphic* statement is it shows the *rawness* of her emotions. It shows her despondency. It shows her anger. It shows her deep humiliation. It shows her despair. She comes, and she says, "I am suffering! I put my servant girl between your legs, and this is what I get for it!" And then Abram, in this unbelievable callousness...Look what he says in v. 6. "*Your servant is in your hands. Do with her whatever you think best.*"

"She is still your slave," he says "Do what you want with her." Look at this. Look at this great hero of the faith, all right? He says, "What are you getting all bent out of shape about? Ok, I had sex with her, but she is still your slave. Treat her as a slave. Do whatever you want." And when it says, "Then Sarai *mistreated* Hagar," do you know what that word *mistreated* is? That's a Hebrew word that's later used to describe what the Egyptians did to the Israelite slaves in Egypt when they couldn't make bricks fast enough.

Do you know what that means? Sarai *beat* her. Abram says, "She is still your slave. Do what you want with her. If your life is getting complicated, take her in hand." She goes back and starts beating her – physical abuse - and Hagar runs. Now what's the moral of this story? Here's where people start to get very confused and very, very upset.

They say, “What is going *on* here? These are supposed to be the heroes of the faith. We’re supposed to be reading the Bible and looking at these moral exemplars, and look at this. Look at how the women are being demeaned! Look at how slavery is being condoned! Look at all the exploitation! Look at all the oppression. Look at all the injustice. This is ridiculous! And Abram is just *fine* with it, and Sarai is just *fine* with it.”

And many people say, “This is why I cannot take the Bible. This is the reason why I believe faiths and religions that are rooted in the Bible are socially oppressive and backward. How am I supposed to emulate these heroes of the faith? This is ridiculous. This is disgusting!” Slow up for a minute. Just stop for a second. Do a little bit of analysis. Why are you offended, and why are you disgusted?

I would like you to at least consider this theory. My theory is it’s because you have not come to the text neutrally. You haven’t come objectively. You haven’t really come open. You’ve already come having been sold a view of what the Bible is before you’ve even heard it, before you’ve even really read it. And what most people think the Bible is about - and therefore what Christianity is about - is they think the Bible is a book of virtues, a series of stories with *morals* to them.

It’s a series of stories of moral examples who show us how we ought to live, and *if you* emulate those moral examples, God will bless you. That’s what people think the Bible is about. That’s what people think Christianity is about. And when they read the Book, they begin to read the Bible already having their mind made up about what it’s about without actually listening to it. And so they get to stories like this and they say, “This is ridiculous!” Yes, of course it’s ridiculous...if that’s what the Bible is about.

But look at this text. This text *proves* to you the Bible is *not* a book of virtues. It’s a book of gospel. It’s not a series of stories of moral examples. There’s not a *single* marriage in the Bible I would want to emulate. It’s a record of God’s intervening grace into the lives of people who don’t *deserve* it, who don’t *seek* it, who continually *resist* it, and who don’t even appreciate it after they’ve been *saved* by it. Look. What is this teaching us? This is teaching us the very best human beings in the history of the world are **moral and spiritual failures**.

They can’t rise above their own culture, they can’t rise above the brutality of their own times, and they can’t escape the self-centeredness of their own hearts. But God continues to come to them, and He continues to not give up on them.

God continues to patiently speak to them and to help them and to aid them and to save them and to rescue them again and again and again. So, you see, look. If you're deeply offended by this, consider the possibility that it's because you have already got your mind made up that the message of the Bible is other than what the Bible itself says it is.

You may think the message of the Bible is give God a righteous life, and then God will bless. So, hey, where's the righteous life? What's the moral of the story? The message of the Bible is not you give God a righteous life and then God owes you, but that God comes to you – to all of us - always by sheer grace and then we owe Him.

In other words, is the Bible mainly about *you* and what you should be doing, or is it mainly about *God* and what He has done? Which is it? If it's mainly about God and what He has done, if it's mainly a gospel, if it's mainly a record of how God continually puts His grace into the lives of people who don't seek it, don't deserve it, continually resist it, and don't appreciate it even after they've been saved by it...then there's nothing surprising about this, is there?

One more quick thing we can learn about from this first figure - this exploited slave – before we go on to the other three. There is an amazing thing God does when He speaks to Hagar the first time. In verse 9, God actually says, “Go back to your mistress and submit to her. You know, the one who has been *beating* you? Go back to her.”

Now if you say, “Oh my goodness! How socially regressive,” you're missing the point. “*Why* do I want you to go back?” Why does God want her to go back in verse 9? Because of verse 10. “Because I want to bless you, and I want to make you a great nation.” Now you have to remember in that culture and in that time, that would be the greatest dream of any man or woman.

In other words, God is coming and saying to Hagar, “I'm going to give you more than you ever dared ask or think. But the way to get it to you is by you going back.” Now as readers, we know *why*. See, we're the readers, and we have the all-knowing view of the narrator. We know this, that at the moment God talks to Hagar the first time, her life is headed for a dead-end, because she is a fugitive slave.

At the very best, she is never going to settle down. She is always going to be looking over her shoulder. At the very *worst*, she is going to be caught and punished and maybe killed. And so here's what God says. “I'm going to give you the freedom you want, but you have to go back.” See, we actually know as the readers that she goes back. God says, “I'll protect you there.” She has Ishmael. And when Sarai's jealousy in chapter 21 reasserts itself, Sarai says to Abram, “Cast out the bondwoman and her son.” Abram sends her out; very unwillingly - but he does it.

That's what you have at the last part of the text. Abram now sends her out. This time she and Ishmael are physically on the verge of death, but God comes through, shows them a well, and saves them again. But this time she is free. She is really free! So here's the point. God sometimes calls us to do things that are extremely difficult, yet they're on the way to some greater blessing. But at that moment, we cannot see the whole picture, can we? We have no idea why.

Can you live with a God like that? In other words, God will give you what you would have asked for if you knew everything He knows...but you *don't*. God says to her, "I want you to go back into a situation of extreme difficulty, and this is the way I'm going to get you to the blessing." She can't see that, but she *goes*. Can you live with a God like that? If He is indeed God, if He is *God*, of course that would be the way He'd be. If you knew everything the future holds, well, *you* would be God. But only God is God.

Do you *live* that way? Are you willing to see the extremely difficult situations that God very often keeps you in are ways to blessing, but you can't see them? Are you able to trust Him? Are you able to handle a God like that? Hmm... So first, that's what we've learned from this exploited slave. Now let's look at the two perpetrators.

That's right. Hagar is clearly, in a sense, the protagonist of this narrative. She is the one who has been harmed, so who has done the harming? The perps are Sarai and Abram. Let's go "ladies first". **Second character, The Barren Woman.** Now when I called Sarai a "barren woman", some of you are wincing maybe. And you *should* be, because in our culture, we're more and more dropping that term. I think we *ought* to because, you see, the phrase "barren woman" is implying that if you are infertile, if you cannot bear children, you're a failure as a woman.

To call a woman who cannot bear children "barren" is to say she is a failure as a woman. We've moved away from that, and here's why. Because we say today, "Isn't that awful that that old traditional culture ..." – and of course, it's not just our past, but it's also many cultures in the world today still - "Isn't that awful that that kind of culture is so oppressive to women, that that culture would look at a woman and say, 'You're a failure as a woman if you don't have children and a family'?" Thank goodness we don't live in a culture like that."

We don't live in an oppressive culture, do we? We live in a culture that says, "You can be whoever you want to be, and you can marry whoever you want to marry." Listen, I don't want anything I'm about to tell you to be interpreted as me saying, "Oh, let's go back," but here's what I want to ask you. When you see these stories, you're looking into a traditional culture in which the family comes before the individual. The group comes before the individual.

And back then, marriages were arranged. Why were marriages arranged? Because the group - the family - decided who you would marry because the criteria for who you married was it helped your family. You married the person who enabled your family to fare well in the world. And the group made that decision. You didn't make your own decision, because the needs of the family came ahead of the needs of the individual.

But now we live in our modern Western culture. And now the needs of the individual - the freedom and the desires of the individual - take precedent over the needs of the family and the group. And I'll be the first to admit that many, many good things have come from that, *but* let me ask you this with the greatest sensitivity, please. Because I know plenty of people who have been involved in this. Let me ask you this with sensitivity.

Yes, that culture was very oppressive to women. It was. No doubt about it. But now our culture, of course, says you can be anything you want to be. The experts tell us almost for certain that when Hagar and Sarai were alive women didn't have trouble with eating disorders, in fact the expert people will tell us in traditional cultures *today*, there are still cultures like this in the world that women don't have a problem with eating disorders, by and large. Why not?

Because, you see, there is no such thing as a culture that says you can be whoever you want. Every culture has a definition of *barrenness*. Every culture says, "Unless you have *that*, you're nobody. You're nothing. You're a failure." And in traditional cultures, you had to have a family and children. *That's* how you knew you weren't barren. *That's* how you knew you were *somebody*. *That's* how you knew you had worth and significance.

But now we say, "Oh, today we can marry anyone we want." Nah. Today you're free to marry anyone you can *attract*. You see, in the modern individualistic culture, the culture is saying to you, "You'd better be good-looking. You'd better be successful. You'd better be smart. You'd better be popular. You'd better be this. You'd better be that." There has never been a culture that didn't say, "You have to be *this*, or you're nothing."

Every culture tells you something, and you bring it in, and you hate yourself if you don't achieve what your culture has told you. You say, "I don't like the way mainstream culture puts all that emphasis on this and this. I've joined a little subculture over here that doesn't believe in that." Well, now you have your subculture. And your subculture is going to tell you *something*.

Whatever your culture tells you you have to be to be a worthwhile person or else you're barren...you take into yourself, and you hate yourself if you don't achieve it. You beat yourself up if you don't achieve it. But it's not just a cultural and psychological transaction. It's a *spiritual* one. Look at Sarai in v.2 where she says, "*The Lord has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my maidservant; perhaps I can build a family through her.*"

Do you know what she is saying? She was a religious person. She believed in God. She prayed. She practiced her religion, *but* when push came to shove...When she had to *choose* between trusting God, staying with God, continuing to trust in His promise...or getting a kid... She was religious *until* push came to shove and she had to choose between God and the baby. What did she want? The baby.

And this is what that means. When your culture tells you, "You have to have this or you're nobody" - and every culture does that - it's not just that your culture is socially constructing your "identity" as the post-modern theorists say...and they're right. Something deeply spiritual is going on. You take that into yourself, and that becomes your *real* God, your *real* salvation, your *real* significance. Don't you see?

That's what's happened to Sarai. Sarai drops the religiosity and shows the *real* thing she is after, the real thing she has to have if she is going to be a significant person, is what her culture told her. And I'm just saying this...the irony of the narrative is that she's the slave too! She has an *inward* slavery. She is inwardly captive. That's the irony. Here's Hagar, and she is literally the slave, but Sarai is a slave too.

What's the point? The point is this; What are you a slave to? If you don't think you're chained, you're *very* chained. If you think, "Well, I'm an individual." No, you're not. You're part of a culture, some culture. Maybe an anti-mainstream culture, subculture. You're something. Your family, your friends, your subculture, your culture tell you, "You have to be this, or you're barren."

Everybody is told that, and we take it inside because we're not sure. We have to convince ourselves and other people we're okay. We take it into ourselves, and it becomes our god. It becomes our salvation. That's what we're being told, and you are chained until something can convince you that apart from that, you really can be loved. We're chained. She's chained. Do you see that? That's the irony of the narrative.

You say, “Well, how are we going to get out of that? What are we going to do about that?” Okay, let’s look at our third figure. **The Stupid Man.** Abram. Verse 2 – And for many years I missed this, because the modern translations say what they say – **V. 2** says, “*Abram agreed to what Sarai said.*” But what it literally says in the Hebrew is, “Abram hearkened to the voice of his wife.” And every commentator - Jewish, Christian, liberal, conservative - says that was an unmistakable signal from the narrator that Abram was the one who was screwing up the most royally. That *he* was having the big fall. He was having the big lapse. Why?

Because that’s *exactly* the word-for-word thing that’s said in Genesis 3 when it says, “Adam hearkened to the voice of his wife.” In other words, Abram is falling - not because he is listening to his wife - but because he is doing the same thing Adam did. And what is that? Neither Adam nor Abram are punished because of who they listened to – in this case their wives - but because of who that meant they *didn’t* listen to.

You see, these two women – Sarai and Hagar - represent two approaches to the blessing. If Abram says, “I’m going to get the blessing of this son through Sarai,” he is going to have to receive it as a complete act of grace. He is going to have to wait for a miracle, because Sarai can’t have kids. But if he tries to achieve it through Hagar, that’s something he

has the human ability to do, because maybe Sarai is infertile, but he is not.

So Hagar is a way of works, and Sarai is the way of grace. Hagar is a way to get God’s blessing through achievement. Sarai is a way of getting God’s blessing through “receivment.” In Hagar, Abram can get God’s blessing by performing - his own power - but with Sarai, he is going to have to wait passively just to receive some divine intervention into history.

But that’s exactly where we are, don’t you see? In fact, Paul understood this. Paul comments on the Hagar/Sarai story in **Galatians 4:22-23**, when he says “*For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and the other by the free woman. His son by the slave woman was born according to the flesh, but his son by the free woman was born as the result of a divine promise.*”

You see, Abram – and Adam - had two options placed in front of him: “Save yourself by works, or wait and be saved by grace.” And he went to save himself by works. He says, “I’m going to get the blessing on the basis of my performance.” And when you do that, everybody’s life blows up. *Everybody’s* life blows up! Why? Because it’s trying to earn your salvation through works, which is the basic reason for our inner enslavement.

We've taken something. We've said, "If I achieve that, *then* I'll not be barren." But that creates this enslavement. That's why Sarai is doing ridiculous things, nutty things, hurting herself, doing desperate things. That's why everybody's life is blowing up. So how are we going to be freed into the way of grace from our inner bondage? And the answer is look at the last figure. There is the exploited slave, the barren woman, the stupid man, and finally...

Number four, **The Mysterious Friend**. Now *who* is the hero of the story? You have the victims - Hagar and Ishmael. You have the perpetrators - Abram and Sarai. But what's interesting is at the end of the first part, when Hagar is on her way to a dead-end life as a fugitive slave, in comes someone and turns her life around. And then the second time when she and Ishmael are out and they're about to die of starvation and thirst and exposure, in comes somebody and turns their life around. It's the hero. Who is the hero of this story? This mysterious figure. "The Angel of the Lord."

Now why is this figure so mysterious? Two reasons. The first thing that's so mysterious about this figure is this is really unlike any other angel we've ever seen. There are angels who show up and do the enunciation to Mary, and they're at the tomb of Jesus, and they talk to John in the Revelation of Saint John. Right? But all of these angels always are very explicit, "I'm not the Lord."

I know this sounds funny. It doesn't maybe seem funny to you, but it's funny to me. One of the funniest places in the Bible is where an angel has shown up, and he is talking to John in the book of Revelation. And it says John fell down to worship the angel, and the angel said, "Get up!" Now I find it funny because it looks to me like he has freaked the angel out. I think that's pretty funny. The angel says, "Get up!"

Why? He says, "I am a created being like you. I'm not God. Don't treat me like God. Don't talk to me like I'm God." But *this* angel is different. First of all, this doesn't say "an" angel of the Lord; it says "the" angel of the Lord. And look how weird it is! In verses 10 and 11, the angel said, "*I* will make you great." Right? He is talking like he *is* God. He is doing the very thing the other angels never do, and yet other times he talks as if the Lord...

He says, "The *Lord* will bless you." Other times he'll say, "*I* will bless you." You see, even Hagar knows at the end. She is utterly amazed when she says, "Have I seen the One? The One I talked to was the Lord." That's really weird, but there's something even weirder about it. Every other time before and most of the times afterwards, whenever God's presence shows up, it's traumatic. Remember when God appeared to Abram in Genesis 15? We talked about it last week.

What do you have? In Genesis 15 when God shows up, there's darkness, and there's dread, and there's a blaze, and there's smoke. Right? It's a horrible situation. It's frightening. It's awesome. When God comes down on Mount Sinai, there's thunder. There's lightning. There's an earthquake. When God begins to *speak* from Mount Sinai, His very voice is too much for people to bear, and they run away. They say to Moses, "Make it stop!"

When God shows up to the prophet Isaiah, He is high and lifted up, and His train fills the temple. The smoke filled the temple. But look carefully here. None of that. If this is the Lord, look how accessible he is. Look how ordinary he is. There is *no* sense of thunder and lightning. There is no evidence of any kind of major, traumatic manifestations. Not only that, but we're not even sure - from what you can tell, it looks like in the very beginning, Hagar wasn't even sure she was talking to something special.

He is so ordinary. He is so accessible. And that was the whole point! Hagar says, "Have I really seen *the One* who sees everyone?" She says, "If that's the case then why am I still *alive*? How could God have come that near? The God who sees everyone, have I actually seen *Him*? How could this be?"

That's a good question. This mysterious figure is God with all of His glory come so near, and yet the Creator of the universe is able to get in a dialogue with a fugitive slave woman and say, "Hey, where you going? What's wrong?" This accessibility, this ordinariness...how is this possible? Well, years later, Malachi the prophet foretold that the Angel of the Lord would someday come to the temple. He says, **(Malachi 3:1)** "*I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly **the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,***" says the Lord Almighty."

That's the last book of the Old Testament, and in the first book of the New Testament, Matthew 11:10, Jesus quotes that verse and says essentially, "That's me." What he is saying is, "*I'm the One. Through me, the glory of God can come near in grace and be safe.*" Well, how could that be?

I'll tell you how. Let's mediate on **Genesis 21:17**, "*Do not be afraid; **God has heard the boy crying as he lies there.***" When Ishmael is dying...poor Ishmael. He was thrown out of his father's house. His life is just one long experience of rejection. And now he is dying at the end. He seems to be at the very end of his life. He cries out, and what does the angel say? "The Lord has heard the cry of the boy."

Why? Because centuries later, another poor woman got an angel who came and said, “You shall bear a Son, and he shall be called...” And when this young son was born into the world, he also experienced nothing but rejection. “He came unto his own, and his own received him not.” And at the very end, even his Father forsook him. If you want to witness to a Muslim by the way, you could do a lot worse than comparing Ishmael to Jesus.

But here’s where there’s a difference between Ishmael and Jesus. That when Jesus was at the very end of his life, when he was stretched out on the cross, he cried out to God too, didn’t he? He said, “My God, my God!” But God did not answer him. God let him sink. God let him die. Why? Well, this is the answer. This is the answer!

Abraham does not deserve to be the father of a multitude. Sarah does not deserve to have a child. And Hagar and Ishmael are not particularly virtuous people. Look, “He will be a wild donkey of a man.” That’s hardly a great résumé. That’s not some noble person. They don’t *deserve* all this help. They don’t *deserve* all this salvation. They don’t *deserve* to have their cries heard. They don’t *deserve* to have God come back again and again and again even though they’re so stupid.

Why does God keep hearing their cries? Because He *didn’t* hear Jesus’ cry. Jesus Christ came and *took* what we deserve. He took what Abraham deserved. He took what Sarah deserved. He took what *we* deserve. God did not hear the cry of His Boy so that He, through Jesus Christ, could hear all the rest of our cries. So He could be both just and justifier of those who believe. Does that move you? Does that change you? Does that become the central thing of your life?

God is really saying in this text, “You will always be a slave to your culture and to the identity that culture gives you *until* your heart is completely convinced that I love you, that you are worth loving as you are, not on the basis of any performance at all.” And that’s the only thing that’s going to really, really *convince* your heart about that. It’s to see what God was willing to do for you. *His* Boy cried...and he sank...so all the other boys and girls could cry out and God hear.

Only then will you get that inner freedom. Only then will you not be a slave. Only then will you not oppress other people. If you know that as much as I love my children, as much as I love preaching, as much as you love your career, as much as your art is important to you if you’re an artist, or your business is important to you if you’re in business, or whatever, these things just become good things.

They're no longer your masters. They're no longer the things that you *have* to have or else you're barren. And then - and then *only* - do you have the inward freedom, you see. The inward freedom. Only then are you not a slave. Now what are you supposed to do with that inward freedom? Here's one last thing to say. This mysterious figure does not only show you the way to inward freedom; it shows you what you're supposed to *do* with it.

What are you supposed to do with your inward freedom? What if you get this new release, this new freedom, this identity that is so stable and so filled with God's love that you're able to no longer have to listen to what your culture tells you? What do you do with that inward freedom? Now do you move out and you reach all the goals in life and you live a happy life and a comfortable life and you have peace in your private world? No.

Look at God. What is His concern here? Think about this. Hagar is an Egyptian, not a Hebrew. Hagar is a woman, not a man. A slave, not free. Not only that, you have to remember this. Hagar and Ishmael are not in the chosen line. They don't show any particular faith in the promise of God to Isaac and Abram. We know they move off into a whole different direction, and yet God is concerned about their exploitation. He is concerned about them.

You know, Walter Brueggemann, a commentator on Genesis, says this about this whole story. It's amazing. He says, "The positive implication is that **God is turned toward the outsider**...It asserts that God has not exclusively committed himself to Abraham-Sarah. God's concern is not confined to the elect line. There is passion and concern for the troubled ones who stand outside that line." (152-153)

Here's what this means. What are you supposed to do with your inward freedom? You get inward freedom so you can look outside and work for the outward and inward freedom of anyone out there who is oppressed, no matter who they are. You're not supposed to take your inward freedom and just have a happy life with it. You look at people who are outwardly and inwardly, spiritually and socially and economically and psychologically oppressed and broken, and you say, "I'm going to lay myself out for them because Jesus laid himself out for me."

There's the picture of the Christian life. You know one thing that's amazing is Hagar gets so excited that God sees her. And she should be! This is the God who sifts stars through His hands like grains of sand. So if you have a God that great, she was so excited God *noticed* her. A God that big! "He notices me!" And she was extremely excited. But how much more excited should you be? Because you know something she didn't know.

God says to you through the gospel of Jesus Christ, “*Notice* you? I’ll tell you how important you are. I *died* for you.” Now if Hagar was excited, how should you be? If Hagar found that really changed her and sent her back into that situation, trusting in a God like this, how much more should you be willing and able to face anything, knowing Jesus did that for you?

Let us pray...