

"Outside the Covenant" Dr. Robert Rayburn

Gen. 16:1-16

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Text Comment

v.1 That is, the promise that God had made to Abram had still not been fulfilled. That fact leads to what follows. Hagar was one of the slaves that Abram acquired while he was in Egypt.

v.3 "to be his wife" indicates the formal, official nature of this relationship and this device to produce children. Hagar would, of course, remain Sarah's slave and be only a secondary wife to Abram. Remember, a number of the sons of Jacob, the fathers of the twelve tribes, will be conceived in just this way. This was a custom in the ANE though this chapter and Gen. 30 will be proof of the sin in it!

Notice the "ten years." Abraham may have reasoned that the promise God had made to him could be fulfilled in this way and it had been a long time since that promise was made and still nothing had come of it! Sarah still had not had a child. In the NT, Gal. 4:22, Hagar's son is likened to those who practice a religion of self-effort and who do not trust themselves to the promise of God.

v.6 See the sin everywhere: Hagar's arrogance in v. 4; Sarah's evading responsibility in v. 5; Abram's doing the same in v. 6; and Sarah's hatred and jealousy in v. 6. It was Sarah's wrong step first and she was the first to suffer for it. Her concern for justice, so highly spoken in v. 5, where she appeals to the Judge of all the Earth, descends so quickly, as it often does, to a lust for revenge. Very much like the couple that hires a surrogate mother who then wants to hold on to her baby, Abraham and Sarah lay plans that did not count on what Hagar would think about it all when she had a child in her womb.

v.7 That is, she was on her way back to Egypt.

v.12 Which came to pass, as we read in 25:18. As you know, the Arabs trace their descent from Ishmael and the hostility between them and the Jews they themselves relate to this ancient prophecy. The point of the remark to Hagar seems to be that while she would suffer oppression and be a slave, her son would bend his neck to no one's yoke. A worthy son of proud mother.

v.13 The angel of the Lord is now disclosed to have been the Lord himself, in a pre-incarnate appearance, a theophany. This happens other times in the OT. The whole of Scripture teaches us to think of Yahweh here as the second person, God the Son, who would later come as Jesus Christ. These theophanies are anticipations of the incarnation and prepare us for God in the flesh.

There are many intriguing and important lessons in this history. We have, of course, the matter of Abram's behavior, his failure of faith, and the trouble that ensued when he sought to bring to pass in his own way and by his own effort what God had promised to his faith. And how realistic. Abram waited **ten years**, but could not wait longer. He had faith for a time, but the length of the test was too much for him. How often this is the case with us. We can wait for a time, but our patience runs out so often too soon. We have in this chapter the account of a man who thought, at least for a while, that "the Lord helps those who help themselves." And the result

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of his taking matters into his own hands instead of waiting on God, of attempting to bring his own blessing to pass instead of trusting God to fulfil his promise, was, frankly, disastrous and, to a certain extent, that disaster is still with us in the world, especially the middle eastern world.

What is more, we have the very important fact, that must not be overlooked, that it is the Lord, that is Yahweh, which is the covenant name of God, who goes after Hagar, finds her in the desert, and makes the promise to her. She finds help and blessing from the Lord because she is part of Abram's house, she is part of the covenant community. The Lord clearly wants to undo an injustice against her that should not have been allowed in one of the households of his covenant.

But, it does not seem to me that these are the great lessons of this piece of history, important as they are. These are not the reasons that these events were recorded for us in Holy Writ, in the divine record of his covenant with Abram, which, of course, is the first clear account of the covenant of grace by which the people of God are saved from sin and death and granted an inheritance forever in heaven.

The fundamental place of this chapter is rather the contrast it poses between those who are to be in the covenant and those who will remain outside of it. For such is the meaning of the prophecy the Lord makes about Ishmael and his seed in vv. 11-12. This man and his descendants would remain outside of the covenant. Though his mother lived for a time under its shadow, neither she nor her son would remain there. Ishmael would not be the child of the promise. As will be made still more explicit in the next chapter, 17:20-21, God will not make his covenant with Ishmael, he will not be an heir of its blessings. In chapter 21:8-21 we have the account of Hagar's departure, with her son, from Abram's tent and from all contact with the people of the covenant. If Gen. 15 is the good news, Gen. 16 is the bad news -- and there is a lot of bad news in the Bible, as there is in the world! It is an honest book! But our culture, even our Christian culture does not like bad news and so we largely ignore it. And so we dismember our faith!

Later, in the NT, the point will be made still more explicit. Hagar and Ishmael represent the way of mankind that rejects salvation through faith in Christ and the promise of God and seeks it instead through their own efforts.

It is, of course, highly important to have this fact, this reality introduced here in the narrative of God's covenant with Abraham, which is the great subject of all of these chapters. It entirely changes the meaning of God's covenant with Abram, -- which in the Bible is the medium, the instrument of salvation and eternal life -- if, in fact, that covenant does not distinguish Abram and his descendants from the rest of the world. A sentimental view becoming more and more popular in our day. The covenant -- that's great. But if you're not in covenant with God that's OK too! In what way and for what purpose did God choose Abram? What is the nature of this blessing that he bestowed on this man? And what difference does faith, which Abram has but Ishmael will not, make? What is at stake in this covenant, in this friendship with God?

Well, we've already said that what is at stake is eternal life and heaven. But the Bible wants us to be perfectly clear about this: there is salvation within the covenant but not outside of it. God speaks of Abram's descendants and of the blessing of the world through them and of their inheritance of the land that symbolizes heaven. The Lord does speak of Ishmael's descendants, to

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be sure. But of them he says there is no such inheritance in their future as he has promised Abram and his descendants: no land, no blessing, and no blessing of the world through them.

We have here, in Genesis 16, the first comprehensive statement of biblical exclusivity, that one must be a believer in God and Christ, must be a member of this covenant of grace, in order to be saved. Here in Gen. 16, already, we have the end of religious pluralism as that concept is so widely understood in our day. In virtually every American and European University, in virtually every class on the philosophy or history of religion, it is taught as a dogma needing no demonstration that all the religions of the world are valid, each expresses the religious impulse of mankind in a different way but in an authentic way, each represents a different but accurate route to God and salvation, whatever God and salvation are taken to mean. And this has been orthodoxy on the campuses of Western Civilization for a century.

But, what is more, it has over this past century increasingly become the teaching of a large part of the Christian church itself. Liberal Christianity, that version of Christianity that supposes to establish itself on the denial of the supernatural origin of the Bible and on the denial of the supernatural character of its history and message, in other words, that version of Christianity that denies virtually everything distinctively Christian about Christianity, of course has long denied that there is but one way to God and heaven and that Jesus Christ is the only Savior of sinners. Indeed, thinkers of this school, the liberal Protestant school, have been the ones doing most of the religion teaching in the Universities of Europe and American. Now Roman Catholicism as well since Vatican II.

But, what is more worrisome still, is that this kind of thinking has crept into evangelical circles as well. There it is still believed that Jesus is the only Savior and that Christianity is the only true religion, but, more and more evangelical thinkers are ready to say that one can be saved without an active faith in Jesus Christ. Clark Pinnock, who is still known as an evangelical, though perhaps that says more about the elasticity of that term than about Mr. Pinnock's theology, in his book A Wideness in God's Mercy, urges us to "adopt a more positive approach towards those of other faiths." He speaks of those he calls "pagan saints" who have faith but are members neither of Israel or the Christian Church. [BOT 399, p. 28]

Howard Taylor, in a pamphlet recently published by Rutherford House, the Study Center of Church of Scotland evangelicals, while rejecting the more overt so-called Christian forms of religious pluralism, such as that of the Roman Catholic theologian Karl Rahner, who holds that "those who have never heard of Christ but are sincere devotees of other religions are counted by God as Christians and saved by Christ," but he believes that all over the world there have been many ordinary people, who recognizing their own unrighteousness before a holy God, have humbly sought him looking for his mercy. When this is done in all sincerity then a new birth takes place." [BOT 398, p. 29] A growing number of prominent evangelicals are speaking this way.

And no wonder. It is the unforgivable sin of our relativist day to claim that your religion is true, that all others are false, that all men must believe in your Savior or they cannot be saved.

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But let us be clear about this. That view is not the teaching of the Bible. We could go on to speak at length about how nonsensical a view it is in many other ways, how sentimental, how logically contradictory, and the like, but we are Christians, so we start and end here: the Bible does not teach it or permit it to be believed.

And Genesis 16 is just the beginning of that teaching. But it is clear enough. One is either in the covenant or he is outside the hope of salvation. Now, let us be clear about this: a person may be in the covenant in an outward way and also not be saved. The Bible will make that point abundantly clear as its history and teaching unfolds: not all Israel are Israel. But that one can be saved outside of the covenant it never says and often denies in the plainest language.

What is more, throughout the entire course of biblical history, the people of God's covenant were rubbing shoulders with folk who practiced other religions, and never once were they told that these other faiths were authentic routes to God or that among their practitioners might be found sincere folk who were humble before God and so born again. Quite the contrary.

And when the church made its way out into the world, after Pentecost, it did so in the unshakable conviction that the world had to hear of Christ and believe in him else there was no possibility of its salvation.

As David Wells says in a particularly powerful passage in his book No Place for Truth [p. 104]:

The apostles asserted that Christ alone is the truth in the midst of a world that was more religiously diverse than any we have known in the West until relatively recently. We today are far closer in religious temper to apostolic times than any period since the Reformation. Indeed, most of the modern period in the West has been quite unlike apostolic times inasmuch as we have been spared interreligious conflict and much of the doubt that invariably accompanies such conflict. It is, therefore, hard to imagine a more specious argument than the one advanced along many fronts today, backed actively by the World Council of Churches and implicitly by the documents of the Second Vatican Council, that the contemporary experience of religious pluralism is the reason that the apostolic formulation of faith can no longer be held! Such assertions make the apostles and often Jesus himself look like innocents who were spared the dreadful dilemmas that, sadly, we have to face with such flinty honesty, in the process divesting ourselves of the very truth that they insisted must be preserved."

See that truth here in Genesis 16. Ishmael would not be a humble man recognizing his own unrighteousness before a holy God. There are no such men in themselves and there is no such recognition without the Spirit of God at work in the heart. As Paul would later put it, there is none that does good, there is none who even seeks for God, really, however much he or she may claim to do so. Human so-called "seekers" are seeking a God of their own devising and when they come face to face with the living God they turn away from him in disgust or hatred.

Ishmael did enjoy some kindness from God, he became the father of a great nation, but this made of him no saint, nor does the mere benevolence of God make any human being a saint. Grace alone can do that, and anyone who denies that grace is necessary to salvation does not know what salvation is or what a man is! Ishmael's life was no pilgrimage to heaven. He is finally cast

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out of the covenant circle because of his mockery of Isaac, a child he hated no doubt because Isaac was to have the position Ishmael desired for himself (Gen. 21:9). And so the spiteful young man leaves the circle of salvation never to be heard from again

The Bible never suggests that anyone's life can be acceptable to God that is lived outside of the covenant God makes with his people and the life of faith in God and Christ.

The other day I came across a lovely verse on the church as one even amidst its disunity in the world. It was written by the blind Scottish minister, George Matheson, whose most famous composition is the hymn, "O love that will not let me go.

Each sees one colour of Thy rainbow light,
Each looks upon one tint and calls it heaven;
Thou art the fulness of our partial sight;
We are not perfect till we find the seven;

Gather us in! What a lovely thought. Christians of various stripes, seeing a part of the truth, but soon to see it all!

But I was dismayed, in the same passage where I found the verse, to read of a sermon of Matheson's on the same theme. His text was: "Who are these that are arrayed in white robes?" He portrayed heaven as a vast concert hall, and asked his audience to take a sweeping glance over it. "Who are these in the centre, before the throne... And who are these over here, and these over here? He replied by mentioning different classes of Christians. Then he asked: "Who is that man at the very back of the hall, the man with the pale, thoughtful face? That is Spinoza. He has only got an angle of the truth, but he is working his way to the front, to the centre. And from all parts of the hall there came cries of "Hallelujah!" and "Help him, Lord; help him, Lord." [Gammie, p. 17]

Well, I can well imagine such an enthusiastic response to such a message at that time in Victorian Britain. Universalist ideas were becoming very popular. But, brethren, if Spinoza, the 17th century pantheist philosopher, who denied the existence of a personal God, is in that banquet hall, then everyone is in that hall, the Gospel is an irrelevance, and the Bible untrue. You should be home in bed or up in the mountains skiing!

Heed the warning of such a man as Bernard of Clairvaux, who wrote, "...many laboring to make Plato a Christian, do prove themselves to be heathens."

The Bible's depiction of man as a sinner in hateful rebellion against God, salvation as alone made possible by the incarnation and crucifixion of God the Son, and new and eternal life in Christ as communicated through the soul's personal union with Christ, all these central truths of our faith are betrayed by any suggestion that one can be saved without living faith in Jesus Christ. What is more, there is no need for these theories constantly being trotted out in our day how one man or another might be saved who knew nothing of Christ and never embraced the gospel and promise of God. God will find his people anywhere and everywhere they are. He can be prevented from reaching them by nothing whatever! He moved whole civilizations out of the way to bring into

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his covenant men and women in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. And those who are not found will never and would never repent and believe. The issue is never whether or not a person has heard. Multitudes hear who do not believe. But no one fails to hear who would believe. Such is the sovereign providence of God.

As Jesus himself put it to his disciples, "I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen [he means Gentiles]. **I must bring them also.** They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd." [John 10:16]

And that is completely compatible with the truth the Scripture does make unmistakably clear:

"Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved." Acts 4:12

Which is why Paul asks in Romans 10:13ff. if one has to call on the name of the Lord to be saved, how can he do that unless they believe in Jesus, and how can they believe unless they hear, and how can they hear without someone telling them? All of which is moot if, in fact, one can be saved without the knowledge of Jesus or belief in him.

No, brethren, from the beginning, we have been taught that there is one truth, one way of salvation, one Savior, one faith, one road to heaven. Abram walked it, Ishmael did not. This is what makes the entire question of the Gospel so vital, so serious. We are speaking of nothing less than life and death, heaven and hell. There is good news and bad, and the good news is only for those in covenant with God by faith in Jesus Christ!

And, as unpolitic and unwelcome as the message of "Christ alone" may be in our proud, superficial, and ephemeral age, we must be inflexible in proclaiming it. For the Lord Christ **is** the way, the truth, and the life.

And, believe me, brothers and sisters, when the present silliness finally passes and when men and women come face to face once again with the true meaning and seriousness of human life, nothing will make more sense, nothing will seem more necessary, but hunting for and finding out the truth. And when people begin caring about the truth once more, they will once again be concerned less about the fact that so many deny the truth and more and more and more about whether or not they themselves have found and embraced it.

Let's all of us be there now and then to help them find it, where it can alone be found, in the covenant of God, in the Word of that covenant, and in the Lion of that Covenant, the Seed of Abram, Jesus Christ.