

Hagar and Ishmael

BANISHED

A Moving Story

WESLEYS' THOUGHTS

“He is about our bed, and about our path. He observes every symptom of our distress, that it may not rise above our strength. And he cannot be mistaken concerning us. He knows the souls and bodies which he has given us. He sees exactly how much we can endure with our present degree of strength. And if this be not sufficient, he can increase it, to whatever degree it pleases him. Nothing, therefore, is more certain, than that, in consequence of this wisdom, as well as his justice, mercy and faithfulness, he never will, he never can, suffer us to be tempted above that we are able: above the strength which he either hath given already, or will give as soon as we need it.”

Extract from the Journal of John Wesley (1703-1791)



BIBLE PASSAGE | GENESIS 21:8-21

⁸The child grew, and was weaned; and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. ⁹But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac.^[a] ¹⁰So she said to Abraham, “Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac.” ¹¹The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son. ¹²But God said to Abraham, “Do not be distressed because of the boy and because of your slave woman; whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named for you. ¹³As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring.” ¹⁴So Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water, and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed, and wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba.

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¹⁵When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes. ¹⁶Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot; for she said, “Do not let me look on the death of the child.” And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept. ¹⁷And God heard the voice of the boy; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, “What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. ¹⁸Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him.” ¹⁹Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went, and filled the skin with water, and gave the boy a drink.

²⁰God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow. ²¹He lived in the wilderness of Paran; and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt.



DISCUSSION

Abraham and Sarah had not conceived children, despite God’s promise that they would be parents of a great nation. This led Sarah to encourage Abraham to lay with Hagar, Sarah’s maid, in order to have a child. Hagar gave birth to Ishmael and Sarah was jealous and treated the woman badly. The text above picks up the story after Sarah has finally conceived with Abraham and given birth to Isaac.

In common with many women throughout history and today, Hagar has no power to decide her own future. She is a slave within the household and therefore, essentially a chattel or possession to be used by her mistress and master in any way they choose. She has no rights over her body, the place she lives or her own child and is at the mercy of those who ‘own’ her.

In Islamic tradition Ishmael does become the father of a great nation and, like Isaac is honoured by his ancestors, even to this day. The human story of slavery, sexual powerlessness and the vulnerability of women and children is still very relevant today. Across the world women and children are in bonded labour – not free to earn a living to support themselves and their families but obliged to pay off impossible debts by working for their gang-masters and ‘owners’.

In the story it is God who, through the angel of the Lord, intervenes and offers comfort and refuge and, most importantly, hope to the distraught Hagar. Today in Britain women’s refuges offer those things to vulnerable people – but local and national funding for refuges is being cut and many are having to close. Women and children who have been ‘sent away’ from their homelands because of

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war or the fear of violence are finding it increasingly difficult to find asylum or spend long years in refugee camps.

Moving stories are often a result of terror and the misuse of power and time and again women and children suffer disproportionately in the face of great injustice.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Look again at the text. How do you feel about the role each character plays?
- Where do you see God active in the story?
- Is there someone in your group willing to tell the story of their experience of seeking refuge or of providing it for another person?
- How can God's loving intentions for all people be made real through our actions – as individual Christians and as a Church?



RESOURCES

<http://www.unwomen.org/en>

Provides lots of information about the lives of women around the world.

<https://makingherstory.org.uk>

An organisation working to end violence against women. Supports women's refuges and victims of rape.