Praise God for paying the debt we cannot afford

*“I have wiped out your transgressions like a thick cloud
And your sins like a heavy mist.
Return to Me, for I have redeemed you.”*

 Isaiah 44:22

These words God spoke through His prophet were directed to His people Israel. Because these are words of prophecy, spoken by God who is outside of time, the wording is as if this has already taken place. This also indicates the trustworthiness of God: what He says He will do can be counted as already done.

This redemption needed by Israel was brought about by Jesus. He took upon Himself the wrath of God that should have fallen on the people. Israel had been a disobedient servant and had wondered away from God; indeed, rejected Him. But God was calling them back to Himself. Again, God is faithful even when we are not.

This same promise has been extended to all of mankind. The promise of redemption has been given to those who are not of God’s chosen people. But when we accept Christ for salvation and we are redeemed by His blood, we then become God’s people. We are the adopted sons and daughters of the Father.

How compassionate is our God. Without Him we would perish. May He be glorified forever.

In Christ’s love

John

 10-23-22

Genesis 16:1-16 (2)

As we began considering this chapter last week, we saw the sin and folly of trying to help God out with His plans, or of trying to hurry Him along. It is incredibly important to work according to His will and to wait for His results. Each of us can look back in our lives and think of times where we did not follow this and had to suffer the consequences. In Jesus Christ, we have the comfort of knowing that our sins are forgiven and we have eternal life; but the consequences of our sin may still be felt in this life.

Sarai gave her maid, Hagar, to Abram as a wife in order to have children. Hagar conceived, but then began to despise Sarai. Sarai blamed Abram for what happened and Abram gave her back authority over Hagar. Hagar was treated harshly, so she ran away. Instead of trying to figure out who is most to blame, it is better for us to recognize that all three sinned and all three were sinned against. We must also understand that each of us are sinners, and that others have at some time wronged us.

Hagar is in a tough position. She is with child and no longer has the status of a wife; and she is also being treated badly and has no recourse to make things better with her mistress. It is perfectly understandable that she ran away. She is heading in the direction of Egypt; but she is met by the angel of the LORD, who tells her to return and submit to Sarai’s authority.

This seems harsh to us, and it is, so we would like to have some idea of why God would give her this command. But first, I would like to point out a misuse of this Scripture. We’ve already considered how the Bible is sometimes misused to promote polygamy, when in fact the Bible is clear that polygamy doesn’t work and is against the way God created marriage. The Bible is also misused to promote slavery, when closer examination shows that we have inherent worth and dignity having been created in the image of God. No one should be a slave.

Unfortunately, this account is one that is sometimes used to keep a woman in an abusive marriage. To use these words in this way is to completely misunderstand what this is about. The incorrect logic is that because the LORD told Hagar to remain in an abusive situation, and because the LORD hates divorce, then a wife needs to stay in a marriage even if the husband is abusive.

This misses the point that the Lord had specific purposes for this particular event. Even though things weren’t pleasant, for Hagar to stay with Abram would be for her to partake of his blessings. She and her child would be provided for until he came of age. The time would come for her to be sent away from Abram, but that too would be in the LORD’s timing. Also, her child needed to be raised with Abram to demonstrate for us the difference between a child of nature and a child of promise.

This is not a sermon about divorce, but I don’t want to leave my comments regarding abuse hanging. Divorce is serious. The Bible is serious when it says that the Lord hates divorce. Jesus and Paul give very limited examples of when divorce is acceptable. The gravity of dissolving a marriage cannot be overstated. Bearing that in mind and considering again what Scripture says about people being created in the image of God, I see no reason a woman should be expected to remain in an abusive marriage. In that case, the husband has already broken the marriage covenant by his behavior.

We must also bear in mind, that even though divorce is serious, it is not an unforgiveable sin. And neither is remarriage. This is a tough and tricky subject, and it is not my intention to have a through discussion about it. But I wanted to address the incorrect way this Scripture can be used.

The one who appeared to Hagar is called the angel of the LORD, or more accurately, the angel of Yahweh. This phrase shows up several times in the Old Testament. Is this simply one of God’s faithful angels or is this someone in particular? While there is still discussion regarding this, a strong case can be made that there are two different references with this term. Sometimes the term means an angel who is faithful to God and is performing a certain task or bringing a message. Other times it appears that the angel of the LORD is none other than Jesus Christ. This is called a preincarnate appearance of Christ; an appearance of the Son of God before Jesus manifested as a man.

In order to tell which is which, we have to look at the context; even then, sometimes we can’t be sure. For example, in 2 Samuel 24, king David took an improper census of the people. As punishment, a pestilence was sent upon Israel. In verse 16 it says, “*When the angel stretched out his hand toward Jerusalem to destroy it, the Lord relented from the calamity and said to the angel who destroyed the people, “It is enough! Now relax your hand!” And the angel of the Lord was by the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite*.” It would appear that this is a destroying angel that was following a command from God.

In our Scripture here in Genesis, it seems that this time the angel of the LORD was Jesus Himself. One indication is in verse 10 where he says, “*I will greatly multiply your descendants…*” Multiplying descendants is the work of God, not of created angels. Another thing to look for is whether or not the angel of the LORD accepts worship. No faithful angel will accept worship; they will defer all worship to God.

In verse 13, Hagar calls Him “*You are a God who sees*” and wonders that she has remained alive after seeing Him. She also names the area of the spring where the encounter took place “*Beer-lahai-roi*”, which means “the well of the living one who sees me”. These are all words of worship and she is not rebuked for them.

Hagar has had an encounter with the preincarnate Son of God. This is such a display of God’s love and His mercy. He has taken the time to appear to a runaway slave girl and give her promises and encouragement. Yes, God sent her back to submit to a mistress who treated her harshly, but He knew that was the way to keep her in Abram’s blessings, and He promised her descendants “*too many to count*”. There was no earthly promise God could have made that would have meant more to her.

Verses 11 and 12 relate the prophecy God gave to Hagar. All of which have come to pass. The child she was carrying was indeed a boy. He was named Ishmael, which means “God hears”. This was to remind Hagar that God hears her in her affliction and cared enough to intervene for her benefit. He told her a few things about her child.

Ishmael would be untamable. He would not get along well with anyone else. The descendants of Ishmael are the Arab nations and we can see how this behavior continues today; especially with his brother, Israel.

Verse 7 tells us that Hagar’s encounter with the angel of the LORD, took place by a certain spring that is on the way to Shur. Hagar was heading in the direction of Egypt. Consider how often Egypt comes up in the Bible. Consider how often people think of it as a land of fruitfulness and how they are drawn to it. And consider that it never lives up to what people imagine.

Abram was drawn to Egypt and he almost lost Sarai. Lot was drawn to Sodom because it appeared fruitful like Egypt and he almost lost his life twice. While in the wilderness, Israel constantly looked back to Egypt, forgetting how miserable they were. Hagar was heading back to Egypt, walking away from the blessings brought by being associated with Abram.

Egypt is also a metaphor for this world. This world offers us all kinds of delights and promises that are contrary to God, but it can’t deliver on any of them. Israel was delivered from Egypt by the power of God, and by His power we are delivered from this world. But just as Israel felt the call to come back to Egypt, we who are Christians feel the call to come back to the world.

But our almighty God is able to use Egypt. Just as God formed the people into the nation of Israel while they were suffering in Egypt, we are being formed for the Kingdom of God while we suffer in this world. We are also heading toward a Promised Land.

The Bible admonishes Christians time and again to persevere. And there are a number of things we are to persevere in. One of them is resisting the call of the world. The Lord God made the world and He made it good. There are things in this life that we can take pleasure in and give thanks to God for them. But because of the fall of mankind into sin, the world is also fallen and we must beware of its temptations.

We so often see people who chase after the things of the world and it seems to us that they have it made. They give no thought to God yet everything works out for them. We are tempted to walk their path because they don’t seem to have the troubles we do following Christ.

For encouragement in this, I invite you to read Psalm 73. The writer of this Psalm is seeing how well life goes for the ungodly, while he suffers difficulty. But then the Lord gives Him understanding. In verses 18 and 19 he says, “*Surely You set them in slippery places; You cast them down to destruction. How they are destroyed in a moment! They are utterly swept away by sudden terrors!*” Think about how the entire Egyptian army was destroyed in a moment when the Red Sea closed on them.

We live in Egypt, but we are citizens of the Kingdom of God. Resist the temptation to be conformed to this world. We have a better place promised to us by God and He will bring us there in His perfect timing.

The last two verses of this chapter read: *So 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 him.* Three times in these two verses we are reminded that this son was born to Abram by Hagar. This is repeated because it is important. This was not the son of promise. This was not the son through whom all the nations would be blessed.

Back in verse two, Sarai said, “*the LORD has prevented me from bearing children*.” And that was true. The LORD kept Sarai barren until the proper time. He kept her barren until there could be no doubt that the child she would bear was brought about by God alone. The birth of this child would be impossible, yet it would take place, so that God would receive the glory.

Here we see a shadow of another impossible birth; of another child of promise. Back in Genesis 3:15, God had promised a seed of the woman who would defeat the serpent, satan. Jesus was that promised seed and He was born of a virgin; something that is impossible. So, God is glorified.

There is one more important thing here for us to pay attention to. One of the mistakes, one of the sins, committed by Abram and Sarai was the harsh treatment of Hagar. Abram and Sarai were blessed by God. They were blessed materially, and they were blessed spiritually. They had the promise of an abundance of land for their descendants. But Abram and Sarai knew they were heading somewhere better, as we are told in Hebrews 11:16, “*But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one.*” In spite of all these blessings, their treatment of Hagar drove her away.

We must look to ourselves. As Christians, we have innumerable blessings from God. Each of us here are materially blessed. And each of us here are looking toward the promise of heaven. But Jesus has commanded us to bring others into the Kingdom, to bring them into the blessings that we have. So, we must ask ourselves: Is our treatment of others drawing them to the Kingdom of God, or is it driving them away?

Pray for wisdom in this area. Pray for discernment. And then be that bright shining light that attracts people to Jesus.

Prayer

Lord God, You know that we are so prone to look at the things of this world and desire them. While You have created this world and declared it good, creation now groans because of sin. There are still good things that You provide for us and we thank You for them; but help us to keep our focus on the better place to come. Remind us that the things of this world are passing away and that we need to make our decisions with eternity in mind.

Keep us humble in the face of all the blessings You provide us with. May we remember that they are all undeserved gifts from You. They are no reason for us to believe ourselves above others. Instead, Your blessings are a reason for us to be servants to others and reflect the love of Jesus.

Thank You for the accounts You provide us in Your word. In them we see Your faithfulness in spite of our failures. We see Your kindness and mercy, even when we stray from Your will. We also see Your strength and power so that we do not take Your kindness for granted. May You be glorified in all these things; work our lives to Your praise.

In Jesus’ name we pray

Amen