

Hagar: A First-Person Reflection

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Genesis 21:9-19
November 6, 2011

You probably do not know me very well. I am certainly not as famous as Abraham, Sarah, Jacob, Joseph or the other big names of Genesis. But I am part of your history. And a little of me exists in you. I am Hagar, the mother of Ishmael.

My story began in Egypt, for that was my home. The Hebrew Scriptures do not tell how I ended up in Abraham's household. So, I'll fill in some of the details.

You see, I was one of the Pharaoh's slaves. That's how I met Abraham and Sarah. Their God had sent them to a place called Canaan. After they had settled, their land was hit with a horrible famine. Abraham and Sarah journeyed to Egypt in order to survive.

Well, when they arrived in Egypt, they told the Pharaoh that they were brother and sister. The Pharaoh was rather smitten with Sarah, and he treated Abraham with the utmost respect.

Your Bible tells this part of the story. It says that Abraham was given sheep, oxen, male and female slaves, female donkeys, and camels. Pharaoh gave him these things because of Sarah. I was given to Abraham to be used as a slave. That's how I got into the story.

Well, as the days passed, Pharaoh learned the truth about Abraham and Sarah. You see, they weren't brother and sister at all! They were husband and wife. Apparently Abraham had been afraid that the Pharaoh would kill him in order to take Sarah as a wife. So Abraham lied. Well, the Pharaoh was very angry, so he sent Abraham and Sarah away from Egypt.

It's funny how things change so quickly. One minute I was a servant of Pharaoh's, the next I was servant of Abraham's, and the next I was traveling to a place far, far away. Forces beyond my control carried me, and there was nothing I could do.

Well, when we arrived in Canaan, God spoke to Abraham. As an Egyptian, I did not know God. I worshiped other gods, but I could not help wondering about this being of theirs. Their God was always guiding them and telling them things. Their God told them that they were going to have many children and that their children would inherit the land. Well, this was rather unlikely, for both Abraham and Sarah were far too old for children. I found the whole thing rather sad.

In spite of this, sometimes I would go off by myself and try to talk to their God. As a servant, I was used to worshiping the gods of my master, so it only seemed natural that I would try to worship Abraham's God. Well, it felt sort of silly, I must admit. There was no statue to which I could bow. I lifted my face up to the sky, and I watched, and I listened—for what? I did not know.

I heard nothing. I saw nothing. I felt nothing.

The next part of my story may sound strange to your ears. You see, our customs and culture were much different from yours. A woman's purpose, a woman's place, was to have children. If a woman did not provide an heir for her husband, she could be divorced. It was believed that a woman that did not have a child was not blessed by God.

The followers of God did not know about the randomness of miscarriage, SIDS, or infertility. It all blurred together as one fact. A barren woman was not blessed.

Well, quite frequently, if a wife had no child, then a slave could have a child for her. I know this sounds appalling and harsh, but in my world it was not unusual at all. I had Abraham's child so Abraham would have an heir.

I am not proud of the next part of the story. You see, when I realized I was going to provide an heir for Abraham, I looked at Sarah differently. Their God had blessed me! Suddenly I was doing something important. I was special.

And Sarah looked at me differently. She was jealous. I don't think she could shake her feelings of inadequacy. As you might imagine, things became rather tense.

After my son Ishmael was born, Sarah tried to care for him, but her worthless feelings prevented it. Well, then the impossible happened. Sarah conceived and had a child. Their silly God was right. Sarah was blessed! Sarah had a purpose. Their God was with her, and I was sent away. I was sent out into the wilderness with a little bit of bread, a skin of water, and a tiny child.

That place where I wandered is a common one. You probably have been there. The failure of a marriage or the breakup of a dating relationship, the diagnosis of cancer, the death of a loved one, struggling with a class at school—all of these things may bring us there.

Sometimes the wilderness appears gradually during the months and years of raising a family, or in the night when sleep won't come. Or it may appear suddenly, when you are called into the boss's office one day and told you no longer have a job. The 23rd Psalm speaks of green grass and still waters. But often when we search for direction and answers, those waters seem to be only a fantasy.

Well, that was my experience that day. I was paralyzed inside! I couldn't think, I couldn't feel, I couldn't cry. Ishmael kept asking me, "Where are we going? Where are we going?" I did not answer him, for I did not know. We simply wandered aimlessly, with no direction and no purpose.

Well, after a while, I realized it was time to stop. I was very tired, and my legs ached. I noticed my feet were bleeding. We sat down, and I took the bread and I broke it, and I gave Ishmael a piece. And then I took the cup, and I gave Ishmael a drink. Ishmael snuggled close to me and fell asleep.

Questions began invading my mind. Why had I been so proud? If only I had thought about what could happen. If I had really believed in their God, perhaps their God would not have forsaken me.

But then I got angry. It wasn't my fault at all. I was only a slave. I had no power. I had no control; I was forced out into this place. I tried to listen for Abraham and Sarah's God, but I heard only silence. A terrible, earth-shattering silence.

Well, time passed and we still wandered. I realized that both of us were going to die. I hugged Ishmael close, and I tried to stay composed. I put him next to a bush to shade him from the sun. Then I walked away. I could not bear to watch him die.

I looked up to the sky, and I wept. I wept because I had done all that I could do and it was not enough. I wept because my son did not deserve to die. I wept because I was completely alone. I wept because the God of Abraham and Sarah was so unfair and so unloving.

And then it happened. I heard a voice call out my name. "What troubles you Hagar? Don't be afraid." No one had called me Hagar in such a long time. I was just the slave woman. But this voice. This voice called me Hagar. And at that moment I knew that it was the voice of God.

I looked around the wilderness, and I saw a well of water. I got up, filled the empty skin with water, and gave my son a cup of its coolness. Colors returned. That frozen feeling was gone. Everything was different. I was no longer a slave woman but a woman who had survived. I was Hagar, a servant of God, and I knew my life would never be the same.

God wants us to question, for to remain silent means we have no compassion.

I tell my story, not to give answers or solutions, for I have none. I don't know why I had to travel through the wilderness. I don't know why any of us travel through the wilderness. But I do know that God understands when we cry out in frustration at the injustices and sufferings of this world. God wants us to question, for to remain silent means we have no compassion. To remain silent means we do not love. To remain silent means the Scripture is an ice-cold statue and not the living Word.

Often, it is in our deepest darkness that we find God's power and creativity.

It is there in the wilderness where we discover the comfort and the courage of God's love. Often, it is in our deepest darkness that we find God's power and creativity. The 23rd Psalm contains a beautiful image.

God, the hostess, has prepared a feast for us, the travelers. A warm fire is burning in the fireplace, as the food is set out on the table. You would expect this feast to include all our friends and families, but this feast is different. It is special. For there at the table sit our enemies. Those people that have hurt us and caused us to wander. The folks with whom we cannot get along.

And there are other enemies. Confusion. Cancer that overtakes our bodies, miscarriage. They are all there at the table. God takes some healing ointment and lovingly rubs it onto our sores. Our wounds no longer hurt. The bruises remain and we continue to bleed, but it is warm by the fire.

When you walk through the wilderness, know that God is with you. God will comfort you, and you will be changed.

Amen.