

The Hope Of Help

A Sermon by Rev. Kurt H. Asplundh

"What ails you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heard the voice of the lad where he is" (Genesis 21:17).

It is hard to imagine a more piteous scene: a woman and her son abandoned in the parched wilderness of Beersheba. The lad, faint with thirst, lies in the scant shade of a desert shrub, crying out for water. The mother, tortured by his cries and the sight of his anguish, has turned her back on the lad and gone from him the distance of a bowshot so as not to see his death. Here she weeps, not for her own plight, which is equally grievous, but as a true mother, out of love for her son. He is perishing.

Hagar wept for the lad, and in that moment of desolation and deep despair the angel of God called to her out of heaven with words of consolation and the hope of help to come: "Fear not, for God has heard the voice of the lad ... Arise, lift up the lad and hold him with your hand, for I will make him a great nation" (Gen. 21:17f).

As Hagar looked up in wonder and wiped away her tears of despair, God opened her eyes to see a well of water. Here she filled the bottle and gave her son life-giving drink so that he did not perish, but lived, and grew, and fathered a nation. God saved Ishmael even though Isaac was to be preferred. Ishmael too was precious in the Lord's eyes.

How fortunate for us that the Lord's concern extends this far, that Ishmael too was preserved. Ishmael represents a spiritual heritage that is also ours. We are Ishmael-like, and deserve to be banished from the house of the Lord.

Ishmael represents the man who is spiritually flawed at birth, driven by self-interest and arrogance. Ishmael represents the man whose only hope for salvation is in the Lord Jesus Christ who came into the world for our welfare. The Heavenly Doctrine reminds us that "the Lord did not come into the world to save the celestial but the spiritual" (AC 2661), that is, the man of the fallen church. In the words of the Gospels: "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick ... " The Lord said, "I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance" (Matt. 9:12,13).

The Lord spoke of His sheep who followed Him and knew His voice, "and other sheep I have which are not of this fold," He said. "Them also I must bring ... and there will be one flock and one shepherd" (John 10:16). Ishmael represents those other sheep, those sheep that have gone astray that must be brought back to the fold.

The comforting message of the account of Hagar and Ishmael is that there is the hope of help. The promise is clear: there is no one who wants spiritual help who cannot receive it. Such is the purpose and reason for the Lord's coming. In this way He could reach out the Divine hand to touch, to mercifully gather all those who wished His aid.

The promise of the Lord's help is prophesied throughout the Psalms and Prophets. How true are these words, and how comforting to know they are true: "I cried to the Lord with my voice, and He heard me from His holy hill" (Psalm 3:4). "The Lord has heard the voice of my weeping. The Lord has heard my supplication; the Lord will receive my prayer" (Psalm 6:8,9). "The Lord is my strength and my shield: my heart trusted in Him, and I am helped; therefore my heart greatly rejoices, and with my song I will praise Him" (Psalm 28:7). The beauty of these words, and so many others like them which can be found in the Word, is not only in their poetry but in their truth and in their promise of help from the Lord.

It is characteristic of the fallen spiritual man to believe he is self-sufficient in spiritual things. This is illustrated in the way we often approach life in this world. How often do we admit that we need another's help? Yet we are constantly dependent upon others. So often we are afraid to admit our shortcomings or needs. We don't want others to see our weaknesses or imperfections, or give them any opportunity to look down on us for a fault. So we maintain a bold and arrogant front that everything is all right, and that we are fully capable of succeeding in all our responsibilities and activities. As a result, we may rarely ask for the help we need.

How much more important it is for us to recognize that we need help on the spiritual plane of our life even more urgently than on the natural plane. One of the fatal errors of spiritual life is refusing to seek and accept help from the Lord. If we are too proud to do so, too self-assured, and if we rely on ourselves to attain to a heavenly state, we are doomed to fall.

Ishmael, Hagar's son, pictures this state of mind in us. His desolation in the wilderness shows the result of such an attitude. So it is that the Lord allows us to come into spiritual states of desolation and despair. It is not that the Lord wills in this way to teach us our lesson through hard experience. We bring it on ourselves. Our desolation and despair is simply the result of our own choices and decisions. And when the state has run its course the Lord is there, offering the help we have always needed but were unwilling to accept before. This is what the banishment of Hagar and Ishmael is all about when understood as to its inner spiritual meaning.

Both Hagar and Ishmael picture faults which signify the faulty states of our own spiritual life. Hagar was contemptuous of Sarah, and fled from her mistress in a state of fierce pride when she dealt harshly with her. Ishmael displayed an arrogant self-confidence in mocking Sarah's infant son.

Such can be our attitude toward what is Divine. Our reason and reasoning powers, based on natural experience, contend with genuine truths from the Lord. We doubt, even mock, the Lord's truths. Who can believe that man does not live of himself but only appears to live so? Who can believe that man has no intelligence or wisdom of his own and that his having anything of his own is a mere fallacy? Our Ishmael states reject these truths. In these states we base all thought and conclusion about Divine and spiritual things on the testimony of the senses and reasonings from sense experience. We challenge spiritual truths with the conceit of a self-assurance and tacit confidence in our own insights.

If we are to make spiritual progress, this state and attitude must be changed. This is demonstrated in the account of Hagar and Ishmael, and the Writings reveal the inner significance of the story.

Abraham gave Hagar a little bread and water before sending her away with Ishmael. We may wonder why Abraham offered such meager rations for his servant and son. In fact, there was little given because a little is all that was spiritually acceptable. The bread and water signify the good and truth which the Lord wills to give us. At first we take a little but accept no more. In our early states of reformation we suppose we do what is good and think the truth from ourselves. We know from doctrinal teachings that this is not so, but that all good and truth are from the Lord. We do not deny this truth, nor yet do we really

acknowledge it. It is something we just do not feel or interiorly perceive to be so. "As all who are being reformed are in such a state at first, they are therefore left by the Lord in what is their own; nevertheless," the Writings state, "they are led by means of this without knowing it" (AC 2678).

While it appears that Abraham expelled Hagar and Ishmael, the real case is that we withdraw ourselves from the presence of the Lord and lead ourselves into a spiritual wilderness. Of such it is said in the Writings: "They are carried away into various wanderings; for it is given them by the Lord to think much about eternal life, and thus much about the truths of faith; but because from what is their own, ... they cannot do otherwise than wander hither and thither, both in doctrine and in life, seizing as truth that which has been inseminated from their infancy, or is impressed upon them by others, or is thought out by themselves besides their being led away by various affections of which they are not conscious" (AC 2679). This is what is meant, we are told, by the wanderings of Hagar and Ishmael in the wilderness.

Such is our typical state. We are led "here and there" in our life. Reflect on what it is that motivates or prompts us to act in one way or another. Is it not often a principle impressed on us by parents in childhood; might it be the influence or beliefs of our friends? How often, too, do subconscious affections or emotions drive our actions? When we think about it, we can see that much of our life is not directed by the Lord and His truth but by a variety of influences. Thus our life is wandering, inconsistent, lacking in spiritual purpose.

Are we content to wander through life aimlessly? At times, yes. Perhaps we are unaware that this is so. But with those who seek reformation and spiritual life, the day of crisis comes. The day comes, as it did for Hagar and Ishmael, when the bread is gone and the water is drained out of the bottle when the little truth we have received from the Lord fails.

Suddenly we come to recognize the weakness of our own rational thought. It is insufficient for us. We see the things of our life dying. We enter a state of despair. This state is pictured in the despair of Hagar who thrusts her son under a shrub and withdraws so as not to see his death. The Writings reveal that this is a state of those who are being reformed, "which is that they are reduced to ignorance till they know nothing of truth, and this even to despair" (AC 2682).

The Lord allows despair although He does not will that we suffer. It is for the sake of our benefit and is therefore permitted. Our self-satisfaction or feeling of self-sufficiency in spiritual things must be challenged and broken. So long as we live in our illusion of self-life, we cannot be saved. During this state we are gripped by what the Writings call "persuasive" light a light of falsity that darkens all light of truth. Such persuasive light is described in the Writings. "In the other life," we read, "that which is persuasive appears like the light of winter, but at the approach of the light of heaven, instead of that light there comes darkness, in which there is ignorance of all truth. With those who are being reformed this state is called the state of desolation of truth ... " (AC 2682:2), and it is pictured by the despair of Hagar.

When despair has reached its depths and man finds himself truly ignorant of all truth and acknowledges his own ignorance the Lord brings consolation and the hope of help. For Hagar, hope came with the appearance of an angel of God. The angel consoled her: "Fear not, for God has heard the voice of the child where he is" (Gen. 21:17). For us the Lord sends consolation through the Word. Its truths still our fears and bring about a sense of hope and peace.

While few in the world may experience the desolation and anxiety described in the account of Hagar and Ishmael, those who do may find hope in it.

How beautiful is the reassurance to Hagar! "Fear not ... Arise, lift up the lad ... for I will make him a great nation" (Gen. 21:17,18).

And then she saw the well of water. It was there all the time but she had not looked for it. The well signifies the Word from which truths may be taken. The Word is always with us. It is there to refresh us and we often fail to see it.

To fill the bottle and give drink to Ishmael signifies a state of instruction. When we reach a point of turning to the Lord, we are eager for His instruction. The Writings teach that "with those who come into a state of enlightenment or of heavenly light they are then in the affection of knowing and learning truths; and when they are in this affection, they are easily and as it were spontaneously imbued with truths: those who are on earth, from the Lord's Word or from doctrine, but those who are in heaven from angels" (AC 2704).

This is the message of hope in the story of Hagar and Ishmael. It is addressed to us all whenever we sincerely seek the Lord's help. For as Ishmael was precious in the sight of Abraham, so we are precious in the Lord's sight.

Notice that the angel said that the Lord had heard the voice of Ishmael "where he is." So with every man: no matter what his state of life may be, his voice is heard "where he is." Wherever we are, wherever we may be, whether in a state of desolation of truth or in the deepest of torments, the Lord hears our cry for help.

Through the power of the Divine Human, which He put on by life in the world, He reaches out to us at any level of life. He is there to guide us to his "well of water springing up into eternal life." This is the truth of the Psalm where we read: "If I ascend into heaven, You are there; if I make my bed in hell, behold, You are there. If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there Your hand shall lead me, and Your right hand shall hold me" (Psalm 139:8-10).

Wherever we are, in whatever state of life, we are not beyond the reach of the Lord's holy arm. Let us seek His help. He comes with healing in His wings; He brings not condemnation but forgiveness, not anger but mercy, not punishment but peace. "For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved" (John 3:17). Amen.

Lessons: Gen. 21:1-21; AC 2694:1,2