

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Old Testament appearances of Jesus: The appearance to Hagar

Good morning and welcome to *Truth for Today*, where we are starting a new series of four talks, based upon the appearances of God to people as recorded in the Old Testament. Such appearances are often called theophanies, which simply mean that God appears in a way that is tangible to human senses. One well known example is God speaking to Moses, from the midst of the burning bush, when he was in the desert. The full account of this can be found in the third chapter of Exodus. Other illustrations of this point can be found in Genesis, such as the twelfth chapter, where it is simply recorded that, "... the LORD appeared unto Abram and said, 'Unto thy seed will I give this land'". However in Judges 6:11-16 a slightly different scene is presented. I shall read verses 12 to 14 from the Authorised, or King James, Version: "And the angel of the LORD appeared unto him, and said unto him, The Lord is with thee, thou mighty man of valour. And Gideon said unto him, Oh my Lord, if the LORD be with us, why then is all this befallen us? and where be all his miracles which our fathers told us of, saying, Did not the LORD bring us up from Egypt? but now the LORD hath forsaken us, and delivered us into the hands of the Midianites. And the LORD looked upon him, and said, Go in this thy might, and thou shalt save Israel from the hand of the Midianites: have not I sent thee?" In this passage, it would seem that the angel of the LORD is really none other than God Himself speaking face to face with His downcast servant, in order to strengthen him for the battle against the Midianites.

I know people who would cast doubt on this understanding of the passage by claiming that God could never, or would never, appear to a person in this fashion, as it is not according to common sense. My answer is that the central message of Christianity is that God appeared incarnate in the Lord Jesus. Colossians 1:19 states: "For it pleased the Father that in him should all fullness dwell". This point is emphasised again in 2:9 of the same letter: "For in him dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily." Those verses are quite definite that the Lord Jesus is God and that when He dwelt upon earth God was here in Him.

Following this introduction to the theme, of this and the following three talks, I must now turn to Hagar, who is the object of today's study. This lady does not have a very prominent place in Scripture if we judge importance by the number of words devoted to a person. She is mentioned in a few chapters in Genesis and again in Paul's letter to the Galatians and that's about it. I must, therefore, sketch in a few biographical details in order to better understand the theophany, or direct experience of God's presence, that she experienced.

The first mention of Hagar in Scripture is in chapter sixteen of Genesis and I shall read the first three verses, though I shall, for convenience and ease, use the name that Abram's wife received in chapter seventeen, changing Sarai to the more familiar Sarah: "Now Sarah Abram's wife bare him no children: and she had an handmaid, an Egyptian, whose name was Hagar. And Sarah said unto Abram, Behold now the LORD hath restrained me from bearing: I pray thee, go in unto my maid; it may be that I may obtain children by her. And Abram hearkened unto the voice of Sarah. And Sarah Abram's wife took Hagar her maid the Egyptian, after Abram had dwelt ten years in the land of Canaan, and gave her to her husband Abram to be his wife." Perhaps, I should remind you that at this time Abram had received a promise from the LORD God that he would be the father of a great nation, yet, up to this time, he and his wife remained childless. It must have been a great temptation for this faithful man to give God a helping hand as it seemed unlikely that they would ever have children. It has been pointed out that the account of the conversation between Sarah and Abram, that we have just listened to, has a parallel in the Creation account of Genesis 3, where Eve talks to Adam in the Garden of Eden. We have no time now to address the matter other than to note the similarities in the statements. In Genesis 3, Eve suggests a course of action to Adam, as does Sarah to Abram. In both cases the man agrees with the woman's suggestion, with the result being anything but beneficial to all parties.

After that slight digression, we must return to Hagar to note that she was an Egyptian. It is entirely possible that Abram obtained the services of Hagar, for Sarah, during his ill advised sojourn in Egypt and renamed her with a Semitic, rather than an Egyptian, name. Abram's trip to Egypt also had an ill effect upon the life of Lot, as we can see in chapter thirteen. When there was strife between the herdsmen, Lot and Abram decided to separate and to go different ways. Verse 10 shows us that Lot chose his way because it was like 'the land of Egypt'. Perhaps, if he had not known what Egypt was like he would have chosen a different direction and would not have ended up in Sodom.

However, we must now take up our subject again and emphasise that Hagar was an Egyptian bond servant in the household and a handmaid to Sarah. We also learned from Genesis 16 that Hagar would act as a surrogate mother,

meaning that any children born to her would be considered as Sarah's. Such a relationship did not breach the conventions of the age, unlike a Christian household today where similar action would be considered unlawful. Where it was wrong, however, was in their lack of faith that God would bring His promise to fruition when the time was ripe. Abram might feel keenly that he lacked a son and heir, yet, from our perspective, he should have trusted that the LORD would work His purposes out.

This is an aspect of Abram's life that challenges us as we move through our lives. Do we fully cleave to the promises of God as outlined in His word? It is easy for us to criticise a fellow pilgrim, either from the past or present, for lack of trust. We are responsible for our own relationship with the living God and no one else's. Let us encourage each other to greater depths of trust and loyalty and not to circumvent the implications of our walk of faith, as we move through our materialistic society, in which we are called to demonstrate our commitment to the Lord Jesus. Abram had the faith to believe God, but not the patience to wait God's time. Have we that faith and patience of hope?

Verses 4 to 6 of chapter 16 of Genesis continue the narrative; "And [Abram] went in unto Hagar, and she conceived: and when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress was despised in her eyes. And Sarah said unto Abram, My wrong be upon thee: I have given my maid into thy bosom; and when she saw that she had conceived, I was despised in her eyes: the LORD judge between me and thee. But Abram said unto Sarah, Behold, thy maid is in thy hand; do to her as it pleaseth thee. And when Sarah dealt hardly with her, she fled from her face." From these words we learn that Sarah's plan did not work out as she intended. Along with a child for Abram, her scheming had produced a hostile handmaid and rival for the affections of Abram. It also produced misery and affliction for Hagar. In the midst of it all Sarah seeks to blame her husband. 'My wrong be upon thee', she states, never for one moment accepting that she was the author of her own misery. How prone we are to act like Sarah and blame anybody but ourselves for the situations that our own actions lead us into.

We come now to the central theme of our talk, this morning, when Hagar met the angel of the LORD. To remind ourselves of the details of this meeting I shall read verses seven to eleven of chapter sixteen of Genesis: "And the angel of the LORD found her by a fountain of water in the wilderness, by the fountain in the way to Shur. And he said, Hagar, Sarah's maid, whence camest thou? And whither wilt thou go? And she said, I flee from the face of my mistress Sarah. And the angel of the LORD said unto her, Return to thy mistress, and submit thyself under her hands. And the angel of the LORD said unto her, I will multiply thy seed exceedingly, that it shall not be numbered for multitude. And the angel of the LORD said unto her, Behold thou art with child, and shall bear a son, and shalt call his name Ishmael: because the LORD has heard thy affliction." It would seem that as Hagar was found by the fountain, near to Shur, she was on her way back to Egypt. This was not to be, however, for, as Bishop Ellicott notes in his commentary on this verse, the LORD was not going to have Abram's son lost among the population of Egypt. The fact that Ishmael must be the father of a free people appears to be the whole reason for the theophany. Both the Jewish and Muslim traditions consider Ishmael the father of the Arab people.

We must now consider the reason why this incident is viewed as a theophany and it must be stated that the whole subject is shrouded in mystery. The John 1 tells us that, "No man hath seen God at any time", while Paul, in his First Letter to Timothy, tells us that; "He is the King eternal, immortal, invisible", who, "dwells in light which no man can approach unto; whom no man hath seen nor can see." (1 Timothy 1:17)

We must, therefore, exercise reverence and respect when we make claims that a theophany has occurred. All we can do is to quote the words of Scripture that would suggest that Hagar was convinced that the LORD had appeared to her.

From verse 11, that we read a minute ago, we noticed that the angel of the LORD spoke unto her. Verse thirteen states: "And she called the name of the LORD that spake unto her, Thou God seest me: for she said, Have I also here looked after him that seeth me."

Notice now that Hagar says that it was the LORD who spoke to her and that she had seen the One who saw her. I think we could be justified in affirming that Hagar had seen God representatively by the appearance of the angel, or as a Hebrew scholar once wrote, "He that was visible was an angel: He that spoke was God." However we look at it the incident, it is obvious that God intervened directly in Hagar's life and sorrow to direct her onto a better pathway.

Fifteen or sixteen years later, there was a further incident where God intervened directly into Hagar's circumstances. It arises from Ishmael's behaviour when he mocked the infant Isaac. Genesis 21:10-11 provide the details: "Wherefore [Sarah] said unto Abraham, Cast out this bondwoman and her son: for the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son, even with Isaac. And the thing was very grievous in Abraham's sight because of his son." Here again we see the resulting folly of Sarah's suggestion that Hagar should be the mother of a child for Abraham. Now, when Isaac was growing up, Sarah did not want a rival to him in the family home and was determined that Ishmael should go, though Abraham was reluctant to participate in the abandonment of Hagar and her son. It was only when he was sure that God would not let the teenager die that he involved himself in the dismissal of Ishmael from his care. Even then, he prepared food and water to sustain mother and son as they wandered in the desert. Verses 15 and 16 draw a

dramatic picture of their plight; “And the water was spent in the bottle, and she cast the child under one of the shrubs. And she went, and sat her down over against him a good way off, as it were a bowshot: for she said, Let me not see the death of the child. And she sat over against him, and lift up her voice and wept.” Probably, many days had passed, with the water and food being eked out sparingly, but all to no avail. In the absence of a miracle both mother and son would die! Such a course was not to be, for God had promised Abraham that the son of the bondwoman would be the father of a great nation. This promise He repeats again to Hagar: “And God heard the voice of the lad; and the angel of God called to Hagar out of heaven, and said unto her, What aileth thee Hagar? fear not: for God hath heard the voice of the lad where he is. Arise, lift up the lad, and hold him in thine hand; for I will make him a great nation.” There is no suggestion here that this was a theophany for the Scripture definitely states that the angel called unto Hagar from heaven, but note also that it was the lad’s cry that provoked the intervention. We learn the reason for this from verse 13 of chapter 21 where it states that the LORD intervened because Ishmael was Abraham’s child. From the succeeding verses we also learn that God was with Ishmael as he grew and disappeared from the pages of Scripture, along with his mother Hagar. It is pertinent to notice that, as Ishmael moves off the scene, Isaac, as the true child of promise, becomes more prominent.

Before we close this morning’s talk, we must glance at the last mention we get of Hagar and her son. We find this in Paul’s letter to the Galatians, where the relationship is used to illustrate an important point of Christian doctrine. The Galatian Christians were exchanging the freedom, which they had in Christ, for the rules and regulations of the Law. In verses 21 to 23 of chapter 4, Paul summarises the Scriptures in Genesis that we have been looking at this morning: “Tell me, ye that desire to be under the law, do ye not hear the law? For it is written, that Abraham had two sons, the one by a bond maid, the other by a freewoman. But he who was of the bondwoman was born after the flesh: but he of the free woman was by promise.” Perhaps I should have emphasised that the Apostle Paul is using the figures of Ishmael and Hagar as an allegory, or picture, to press home his point regarding the struggle between Judaism and Christianity. He has been arguing that the Galatians should retain the freedom that the Lord Jesus had secured for them through His death at Calvary.

Paul actually states in verse 25 that Hagar corresponds to Mount Sinai where the Law was given. In order for us to grasp the argument I will quote his words from verses 24 to 26; “Which things are an allegory: for these are the two covenants; the one from the Mount Sinai, which gendereth to bondage, which is Agar. For this Agar is Mount Sinai in Arabia, and answereth to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children. But Jerusalem which is above is free, which is the mother of us all.”

If we compare the various elements of Paul’s allegory we will better understand his argument. Hagar, the bondwoman, is compared with Sarah, the free woman, Ishmael was born naturally, while Isaac was supernaturally conceived; the old covenant stands opposed by the new covenant and the earthly Jerusalem by the heavenly.

The lesson for us then is to grasp, firmly, the wonder of being brought into the freedom of the spiritual life, which the Lord Jesus secured for us at such a cost. Paul states, in verse 28, that we are the children of promise. Why should we seek to be bound by rules and regulations, thinking that, by these, we can secure for ourselves the promises and salvation of God? As believers, we are no longer in a subservient position, outside of the vale of blessing; rather we are, as the Apostle claims, ‘sons and heirs of God’. As Isaac had free access to his father, in like manner we have access to our Father, in heaven. I finish by quoting a verse from a hymn;

*“When our hearts this place accord Him,
When, as Isaac, He has come,
Cast the bond slave out and ruleth
As the Lord upon His throne;
Then our hearts bow down before Him,
This world’s glory waxeth dim,
Every hindrance then must vanish,
All be subject unto Him.”*

May we all accord the Lord Jesus Christ that place of authority in our lives, as He was the One who, for our salvation, manifested in Himself, that complete and perfect theophany, in that in Him dwelt all the fullness of the Godhead.

Good morning and thank you for listening.

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