

NOTES ON THE BOOK OF GENESIS

by

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

HERE we find unbelief casting its dark shadow across the spirit of Abraham, and again turning him aside for a season from the path of simple, happy confidence in God.

“And Sarai said unto Abram, Behold the Lord hath restrained me from bearing.”

These words bespeak the usual impatience of unbelief: and Abram should have treated them accordingly, and waited patiently on the Lord for the accomplishment of his gracious promise.

The poor heart naturally prefers anything to the attitude of waiting. It will turn to any expedient, any scheme, any resource, rather than be kept in that posture. It is one thing to believe a promise at the first, and quite another thing to wait quietly for the accomplishment thereof. We can see this distinction constantly exemplified in a child.

If I promise my child anything, he has no idea of doubting my word; but yet, I can detect the greatest possible restlessness and impatience in reference to the time and manner of accomplishment. And cannot the wisest sage find a true mirror in which to face himself reflected in the conduct of a child? Truly so. Abraham exhibits faith, in Chapter 15 and yet he fails in patience in Chapter 16. Hence the force and beauty of the apostle's word, in Hebrews 6, **“followers of them who through faith and patience inherit the promises!”**

God makes a promise:

- Faith believes it;
- Hope anticipates it;
- Patience waits quietly for it.

There is such a thing in the commercial world as “the present worth” of a bill or promissory note; for if men are called upon to wait for their money, they must be paid for waiting. Now, in faith's world, there is such a thing as the present worth of God's promise; and the scale by which that worth is regulated is the heart's experimental knowledge of God; for according to my estimate of God, will be my estimate of his promise; and moreover, the subdued and patient spirit finds its rich and full reward in waiting upon Him for the accomplishment of all that he has promised.

However, as to Sarah, the real amount of her word to Abraham is this, "The Lord hath failed me; it may be, my Egyptian maid will prove a resource for me." Anything but God for a heart under the influence of unbelief.

It is often truly marvellous to observe the trifles to which we will betake ourselves when once we have lost the sense of God's nearness, his infallible faithfulness, and unfailing sufficiency. We lose that calm and well-balanced condition of soul so essential to the proper testimony of the man of faith; and, just like other people, betake ourselves to any or every expedient, in order to reach the wished-for end, and call that "a laudable use of means."

But it is a bitter thing to take ourselves out of the place of absolute dependence upon God.

The consequences must be disastrous.

Had Sarah said, "Nature has failed me, but God is my resource," how different it would have been! This would have been her proper ground; for nature really had failed her. But then it was nature in one shape, and therefore she wished to try nature in another. She had not learnt to look away from nature in every shape.

In the judgment of God and of faith, nature in Hagar was no better than nature in Sarah. Nature, whether young or old, is alike to God; and, therefore, alike to faith; but, ah! we are only in the power of this truth when we are experimentally finding our living centre in God himself.

When the eye is taken off that glorious Being, we are ready for the meanest device of unbelief. It is only when we are consciously leaning on the only true, the only wise, the living God, that we are enabled to look away from every creature stream. It is not that we shall despise God's instrumentality. By no means. To do so would be recklessness and not faith.

Faith values the instrument, not because of itself, but because of Him who uses it. Unbelief looks only at the instrument, and judges of the success of a matter by the apparent efficiency thereof, instead of by the sufficiency of him who, in grace, uses it. Like Saul, who, when he looked at David, and then looked at the Philistine, said, "**Thou art not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him; for thou art but a youth.**" Yet the question in David's heart was, not as to whether he was able, but whether the Lord was able.

The path of faith is a very simple and a very narrow one. It neither deifies the means on the one hand, nor despises it on the other. It simply values it, so far as it is evidently God's means, and no further.

There is a vast difference between God's using the creature to minister to me, and my using it to shut him out. This difference is not sufficiently attended to.

God used the ravens to minister to Elijah, but Elijah did not use them to exclude God. If the heart be really trusting in God, it will not trouble itself about his means. It waits on him, in the sweet assurance that by what means soever he pleases, he will bless, he will minister, he will provide.

Now, in the case before us, in this chapter, it is evident that Hagar was not God's instrument for the accomplishment of his promise to Abraham.

He had promised a son, no doubt, but he had not said that this son should be Hagar's; and, in point of fact, we find from the narrative, that both Abraham and Sarah "**multiplied their sorrow,**" by having recourse to Hagar; for "**when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress was despised in her eyes.**"

This was but the beginning of those multiplied sorrows which flowed from hastening after nature's resources.

Sarah's dignity was trampled down by an Egyptian bond-woman and she found herself in the place of weakness and contempt. The only true place of dignity and power is the place of felt weakness and dependence. There is none so entirely independent of all around as the man who is really walking by faith, and waiting only upon God; but the moment a child of God makes himself a debtor to nature or the world, he loses his dignity, and will speedily be made to feel his toss.

It is no easy task to estimate the loss sustained by diverging, in the smallest measure, from the path of faith. No doubt, all those who walk in that path will find trial and exercise; but one thing is certain, that the blessings and joys which peculiarly belong to them are infinitely more than a counterpoise; whereas, when they turn aside, they have to encounter far deeper trial and naught but that.

"And Sarai said, My wrong be upon thee."

When we act wrong, we are oftentimes prone to lay the blame on someone else. Sarah was only reaping the fruit of her own proposal, and yet she says to Abraham, "**My wrong be upon thee;**" and then, with Abraham's permission, she seeks to get rid of the trial which her own impatience had brought upon her. "**But Abram said unto Sarai, Behold thy maid is in thy hand; do to her as it pleaseth thee. And when Sarai dealt hardly with her, she fled from her face.**"

This will not do.

"The bond-woman" cannot be got rid of by hard treatment. When we make mistakes, and find ourselves called upon to encounter the results thereof, we cannot counteract those results by carrying ourselves with a high hand. We frequently try this method, but we are sure to make matters worse thereby.

If we have done wrong, we should humble ourselves and confess the wrong, and wait on God for deliverance. But there was nothing like this manifested in Sarah's case. Quite the reverse. There is no sense of having done wrong; and, so far from waiting on God for deliverance, she seeks to deliver herself in her own way. However, it will always be found that every effort which we make to rectify our errors, previous to the full confession thereof, only tends to render our path more difficult.

Thus Hagar had to return, and give birth to her son, which son proved to be not the child of promise at all, but a very great trial to Abraham and his house, as we shall see in the sequel.

Now, we should view all this in a double aspect; first, as teaching us a direct practical principle of much value; and secondly, in a doctrinal point of view.

And, first, as to the direct, practical teaching, we may learn that when, through the unbelief of our hearts, we make mistakes, it is not all in a moment, nor yet by our own devices, we can remedy them.

Things must take their course.

“Whatsoever a man soweth that shall he also reap. For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit, shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting.”

This is an unalterable principle, meeting us again and again on the page of inspiration, and also on the page of our personal history. Grace forgives the sin and restores the soul; but that which is sown must be reaped. Abraham and Sarah had to endure the presence of the bondwoman and her son for a number of years, and then get rid of them in God’s way.

There is peculiar blessedness in leaving ourselves in God’s hands.

Had Abraham and Sarah done so on the present occasion, they would never have been troubled with the presence of the bond-woman and her son; but, having made themselves debtors to nature, they had to endure the consequences. But, alas! we are often **“like a bullock unaccustomed to the yoke,”** when it would be our exceeding comfort to **“behave and quiet ourselves as a child that is weaned of his mother.”**

No two figures can be more opposite than a stubborn bullock and a weaned child. The former represents a person senselessly struggling under the yoke of circumstances, and rendering his yoke all the more galling by his efforts to get rid of it; the latter represents one meekly bowing his head to everything, and rendering his portion all the sweeter by entire subjection of spirit.

And now, as to the doctrinal view of this chapter.

We are authorized to look at Hagar and her son, as figures of the covenant of works, and all who are thereby brought into bondage. (See Galatians 4:22-25).

“The flesh” is, in this important passage, contrasted with **“promise;”** and thus we not only get the divine idea as to what the term **“flesh”** implies, but also as to Abraham’s effort to obtain the seed by means of Hagar, instead of resting in God’s **“promise.”**

The two covenants are allegorized by Hagar and Sarah, and are diametrically opposite the one to the other.

The one gendering to bondage, inasmuch as it raised the question as to man's competency "to do" and "not to do," and made life entirely dependent upon that competency.

"The man that doeth these things shall live in them."

This was the Hagar-covenant.

But the Sarah-covenant reveals God as the God of promise, which promise is entirely independent of man, and founded upon God's willingness and ability to fulfil it. When God makes a promise there is no "if" attached thereto. He makes it unconditionally, and is resolved to fulfil it; and faith rests in him in perfect liberty of heart. It needs no effort of nature to reach the accomplishment of a divine promise.

Here was, precisely, where Abraham and Sarah failed. They made an effort of nature to reach a certain end, which end was absolutely secured by a promise of God.

This is the grand mistake of unbelief.

By its restless activity, it raises a hazy mist around the soul, which hinders the beams of the divine glory from reaching it.

"He could there do no mighty work, because of their unbelief."

One great characteristic virtue of faith is, that it ever leaves the platform clear for God to show himself; and truly, when he shows himself, man must take the place of a happy worshipper.

The error into which the Galatians allowed themselves to be drawn, was the addition of something of nature to what Christ had already accomplished for them by the Cross. The Gospel which had been preached to them and which they had received, was the simple presentation of God's absolute, unqualified, and unconditional, grace.

"Jesus Christ had been evidently set forth crucified among them."

This was not merely promise divinely made, but promise divinely and most gloriously accomplished. A crucified Christ settled everything in reference both to God's claims and man's necessities. But the false teachers upset all this, or sought to upset it, by saying, **"Except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved."**

This, as the apostle teaches them, was in reality **"making Christ of none effect."**

Christ must either be a whole Saviour, or no Saviour at all.

The moment a man says, "Except ye be this or that, ye cannot be saved," he totally subverts Christianity; for in Christianity I find God coming down to me just as I am, a lost, guilty, self-destroyed sinner; and coming moreover with a full remission of all my sins, and a full salvation from my lost estate, all perfectly wrought; by Himself on the Cross

Hence, therefore, a man who tells me, “You must be so and so, in order to be saved,” robs the Cross of all its glory, and robs me of all my peace.

If salvation depends upon our being or doing aught, we shall inevitably be lost. Thank God it does not; for the great fundamental principle of the Gospel is, that God is ALL, - man is NOTHING. It is not a mixture of God and man. It is all of God.

The peace of the Gospel does not repose in part on Christ’s work, and in part on man’s work; it reposes wholly on Christ’s work, because that work is perfect, - perfect forever; and it renders all who put their trust in it as perfect as itself.

Under the law, God as it were stood still to see what man could do; but in the Gospel God is seen acting, and as for man, he has but to “**stand still and see the salvation of God.**”

This being so, the inspired apostle hesitates not to say to the Galatians, “**Christ is become of no effect unto you; whosoever of you are justified by law, ye are fallen from grace.**”

If man has anything to do in the matter, God is shut out; and if God is shut out, there can be no salvation, for it is impossible that man can work out a salvation by that which proves him a lost creature; and then if it be a question of grace, it must be all grace.

It cannot be half grace, half law. The two covenants are perfectly distinct. It cannot be half Sarah and half Hagar. It must be either the one or the other. If it be Hagar, God has nothing to do with it; and if it be Sarah, man has nothing to do with it. Thus; it stands throughout.

The law addresses man, tests him, sees what he is really worth, proves him a ruin, and puts him under the curse; and not only puts him under it, but keeps him there so long as he is occupied with it,- so long as he is alive.

“**The law hath dominion over a man so long as he liveth;**” but when he is dead, its dominion necessarily ceases so far as he is concerned, though it still remains in full force to cure every living man.

The Gospel, on the contrary, assuming man to be lost, ruined, dead, reveals God as he is,

- the Saviour of the lost,
- the Pardoner of the guilty,
- the Quickener of the dead.

It reveals him, not as exacting aught from man, (for what could be expected from one who has died a bankrupt?) but as exhibiting his own independent grace in redemption. This makes a material difference and will account for the extraordinary strength of the language employed in the Epistle to the Galatians: “**I marvel**” - “**Who hath bewitched you?**” - “**I am afraid of you**” - “**I stand in doubt of you**” - “**I would they were even cut off that trouble you.**”

This is the language of the Holy Ghost, who knows the value of a full Christ and a full salvation; and who also knows how essential the knowledge of both is to a lost sinner.

We have no such language as this in any other Epistle; not even in that to the Corinthians, although there were some of the grossest disorders to be corrected amongst them.

All human failure and error can be corrected by bringing in God's grace; but the Galatians, like Abraham in this chapter, were going away from God, and returning to the flesh.

What remedy could be devised for this?

How can you correct an error which consists in departing from that which alone can correct any thing?

To fall from grace, is to get back under the law, from which nothing can ever be reaped but "**the curse.**"

May the Lord establish our hearts in his own most excellent grace!

~ end of chapter 16 ~

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