

# GOD WILL NOT CAST US OUT!

**Genesis 21:8-21**  
**Matthew 10:26-31**

*Our painful situations will be redeemed.*

A sermon preached by  
Rev. William O. (Bud) Reeves  
First United Methodist Church  
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It was wonderful last week to focus on recapturing our sense of joy. We asked the question, “What brings you joy?” and the conversation was lively. DeeDee and Trevor made a short video asking people on the street the same question, and many of the responses had to do with family. That was great, especially for Father’s Day, right?

But often we get the impression that everybody’s family is happy but mine. Everybody’s relationships bring joy to their hearts, except mine. There is this Facebook or Instagram family that everyone has, full of parties and joyous occasions, and everybody is smiling, and nobody is having to deal with all the stuff that I am having to deal with.

Let me bring a word of comfort and reality today. Even though families are often a great source of joy, they can be a great source of pain as well. Nobody’s family is like it appears on social media. Nobody’s life is that perfect. Everybody’s got issues.

Used to, if you told me you had issues, I would have assumed you had a magazine collection. Not anymore. Everybody seems to be carrying some sort of emotional, psychological, or spiritual baggage around that they need to deal with. One counselor remarked that nobody survives to adulthood without bearing some psychological scars.<sup>1</sup> We all have issues: family dysfunctions, individual crises, destructive habits, broken relationships, physical illness, grief over loss, or economic hardship.

The question we bring with us into worship each Sunday is, can God help? Does God care? Can faith help me with my issues? Is there something that will ease the pain?

Last week when I was telling the story of the birth of Isaac, I mentioned Hagar and Ishmael, and I said that was a whole different story. Today I want to deal with that story. Abraham and Sarah are the father and mother of faith for three different religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. But we can see today that even their family had issues.

Abraham and Sarah finally received what had been promised to them by God years before. At the age of 100, Abraham became the father of Isaac; at the age of 90, Sarah became his mother. They finally had an heir; laughter was everywhere. When Isaac was strong enough to be weaned, they threw a big party, because it looked like the kid was

going to make it, never a foregone conclusion in that world. Through Isaac, Abraham and Sarah would produce multitudes of offspring and become a great nation.

There was only one problem. Isaac was not Abraham's first-born son. Remember, Isaac was promised 25 years before he was born, when Abraham was a spring chicken of 75. After about a decade of waiting, Abraham and Sarah decided to take things into their own hands. In that culture, when a couple had no children, the master could have children with his slave women, and the master would have legal rights to the child as his own. I'm not saying it was moral; it was just done.

(It makes me wonder when people want to talk about "Biblical marriage." Which Biblical marriage do we want to follow? Abraham with one wife and a slave mistress, Jacob with two wives and two concubines,<sup>2</sup> David with at least eight wives,<sup>3</sup> Solomon with 700 wives and 300 concubines,<sup>4</sup> or Paul, who said it was better not to get married at all? It's complicated, and perhaps a sermon for another day.)

So Abraham had relations with Hagar, Sarah's Egyptian slave, and she became pregnant. Though Sarah had given her permission, it was still a slap in the face. And Hagar did not make things any easier. She began to act disrespectfully toward Sarah. I mean, who was the real wife here? The old, barren woman, or the young one who was producing the children? Sarah retaliated by treating Hagar like a dog, and Hagar ran away into the wilderness—the first time. God met her in the wilderness and told her to return and submit to Sarah, because her son would also be the father of a great nation. So Hagar returned and had a son, whom Abraham named Ishmael, which means "God hears," because God had heard the cry of his mother in the wilderness.

It was fourteen more years before Isaac was born, and in that time, Abraham had grown rather attached to his first son Ishmael. Sarah had not. At the celebration of Isaac's weaning, she thought she saw Ishmael playing with Isaac, but the Hebrew word has the sense of teasing or making fun. Sarah went ballistic: "*Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac!*"<sup>5</sup> Abraham didn't know what to do. So he prayed, and he thought he heard God say, "Man, Sarah is off the charts! You'd better do what she says. When mama ain't happy, ain't nobody happy. But don't worry about Ishmael; I will still make a great nation out of him." So Abraham got up the next morning, gave Hagar a loaf of bread and a canteen of water, and said, "Have a nice life, short as it will be out there in the wilderness."

Now it gets a little confusing, because Ishmael should be about 14 years old, yet the story reads like he is a babe in arms. Just bear with the story for a minute. When the water ran out, Hagar laid Ishmael under a bush and walked some distance away, because she couldn't stand to see her child die of thirst. She wept at the thought. But just like before, God came to her in the wilderness and assured her that they would be saved. God was not the one who had cast them out. God's plan was still to make a great nation of Ishmael. Then God opened Hagar's eyes to see a well full of water nearby. She gave Ishmael a drink, and they lived from then on in the desert. Hagar eventually got her son a wife from her homeland of Egypt. Ishmael fathered the nation that eventually became the Arab nations and the cradle of Islam—which may explain why even though Jews and Arabs have the same father in Abraham, they don't get along, even today.

I don't know about you, but I have some issues with this story. First there is the rape of the slave girl Hagar, followed by her mistreatment and oppression at the hands of her masters. I have to remind myself that this is not the culture or morality of today. Then

there is the dysfunctional family of Abraham and Sarah. Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar all behave badly. And what about God, telling Abraham to do whatever Sarah says, even to send Hagar and Ishmael out to certain death in the wilderness? And how old was Ishmael anyway?

There are too many issues to unravel in a short amount of time. But what does this story mean for us? How does it speak to our point of need today? I just want simply to say two good things.

**First, God has a heart for the hurting.** He cares for those who are in pain and broken and downtrodden and oppressed. The people on the margins are in the center of God's heart. Those are his special people. Two times he met Hagar in the wilderness and saved her from death. He had compassion on Ishmael, left under a bush to die of thirst. That's the kind of God we have, like the Psalmist says, "*As a father has compassion for his children, so the Lord has compassion for those who fear him.*"<sup>6</sup>

The prophet Isaiah called God's people to reflect the compassion of their heavenly Father: "*Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin? Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly.*"<sup>7</sup> This is what God wants us to be busy doing—helping the hurting.

When Jesus was among us, he continued God's compassion for the broken, hurting people of the world—the poor, the sick, the blind, the lame, the lepers and other outcasts of his time. He reminded the people that even God's smallest creatures are under God's care: "*Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. ...So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.*"<sup>8</sup> "His eye is on the sparrow, so I know he watches me."<sup>9</sup> When Jesus gave his life on the cross, he showed in perfect, graphic detail the kind of God we have—a God who does not turn away from pain, a God who has a heart for the hurting.

Tim White is a father in Bronte, Texas, whose son Ryan was born with multiple physical problems. He had 30 surgeries by the time he was 15 years old. Once when he was about 8, he was in the hospital for yet another surgery. Tim and his wife always walked with him as far as the doors of the operating room, where they assured him one last time of their love and that everything would be OK.

This time, as they got to the doors, Ryan sat up in the bed, looked Tim in the eyes and pleaded, "Daddy, don't let them take me!"

Tim White said, "At that moment, my heart was broken. I would have done anything to take him off that bed, except for the fact that he had to have the surgery. That knowledge didn't ease the pain in my heart at all. I just stood there trembling as the doors closed, and he disappeared. That is when I broke down into tears."<sup>10</sup> He had to let him go, for his own good.

If a human father can have that kind of compassion for his son, how much more can our God of love care for those who hurt? God watched God's own son cry out in the Garden of Gethsemane, "*Father, if it be thy will, let this cup pass from me,*"<sup>11</sup> which translated means, "Daddy, don't let them take me!" God had to let Jesus go, for the good of the world. So whatever issues we are dealing with today, we know God knows, and God cares.

Because our God has a heart for the hurting, **God will redeem our painful situations.** God cannot always take away the pain of living in this world, but God will give us strength and courage to cope with our difficulties. God will give us hope to carry on. God will provide options for us to respond to our suffering. If we pay attention, God will teach us in the midst of the tough days we face.

For Hagar and Ishmael, cast out in the wilderness to die, God first encouraged them, and then God provided a well of water so they would not die of thirst. God redeemed their suffering and oppression.

God took the brutal death of Jesus and turned it into Easter. Through the suffering of Jesus, God defeated evil, sin, and death forever and offered to us the gift of abundant and eternal life. The cross and the resurrection of Jesus Christ is our well of living water to deal with the issues of life.

Somehow God will find a way to redeem our suffering, if we turn to God when we suffer. Many years ago, I knew a woman with a lot of issues in her life. She grew up in a horrible family situation. Her father and mother were both alcoholics. Her father abused her. This woman grew up stuffing all that garbage inside herself and not letting anything show. Her self-esteem was just about zero. But she grew up and married a man—who turned out to be just like her father. They divorced. So she was trying to live and raise her children and deal with her brothers and sisters, some of whom were also alcoholics.

It was just a sad situation. If ever a life needed the healing power of God, it was this one. But one of the saddest things she said to me was that she never felt comfortable in church. Everybody else seemed so perfect, and she knew what was going on inside her life. (How little she understood that everybody has issues!) My friend said, “I would just sit there and feel out of place. I never felt worthy of love.”

But then she found an organization called Adult Children of Alcoholics. It’s a program similar to Alcoholics Anonymous, except it’s for adults who had to deal with alcoholic parents growing up. Suddenly this woman found the love she had been looking for. She found that other people felt the same way she did and had experienced the same horror she had. She found the support she so desperately needed.

After a few months in this group, this child of God made a remarkable statement to me. She said, “Through my support group, I have found the love of God. I have found that I am capable of love, and I am even beginning to believe that I am worthy of love.” God can redeem our situations of pain no matter how far into the wilderness we have wandered. God can bring us home.

When I think of the story of the slave girl Hagar in the wilderness, I think of Harriet Jacobs. In her book *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Harriet wrote these words about her years of slavery: “Only by experience can anyone realize how deep and dark and foul is that pit of abominations.”

Harriet was born in 1813 in North Carolina. For the first six years of her life, she lived in a comfortable home with her parents and brother, not realizing she was a slave. But when her mother died, Harriet learned she wasn't free. She was sold to a new master, who made advances toward her. The master’s wife was jealous and treated her harshly. Harriet took comfort in a relationship with a white lawyer in her town and bore him two children.

In retaliation, her master sent her to work on a plantation in the fields. Harriet escaped and hid in the attic of her grandmother’s house. Eventually the father of her children

bought their freedom and sent them to the grandmother's house, but Harriet was so afraid, she never came out of hiding, even to see her children.

After seven years, Harriet escaped to the North, and two years later, her children joined her. Harriet was still subject to capture because of the Fugitive Slave Law. Her freedom only became complete ten years later when her employer bought her freedom for \$300.

Harriet Jacobs knew about slavery, fear, and brutality. She experienced the pain of a family torn apart, the indignity of being sold as property, and the anxiety of living at the whim of someone else. But she learned to read and write, and she wrote about her life experiences in the book called *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. It was published in 1861, the year the Civil War began. Harriet concluded her book with these words: "Reader, my story ends with freedom."<sup>12</sup>

Do you find yourself enslaved in the circumstances of your life today? Are you in bondage to sin, sickness, dysfunctional family relationships, destructive habits, grief or uncertainty? Are you looking for something to help? Let me say a word of good news to you today: **FREEDOM**. You can be free from your slavery, free from your bondage. God can liberate you from whatever issues you face. God can't always take away the pain, but God can set you free from misery and despair and give you a future with hope. God has a heart for those who suffer, and God can redeem your painful situations. God can bring you home. You will never be cast out!

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<sup>1</sup> Archibald Hart, *Leadership*, Vol. 12, no. 3, *PreachingToday.com*.

<sup>2</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jacob>.

<sup>3</sup> Eight are named in 1 and 2 Samuel, with an indication there were others. 2 Samuel 5:13.

<sup>4</sup> 1 Kings 11:3.

<sup>5</sup> Genesis 21:10.

<sup>6</sup> Psalm 103:13.

<sup>7</sup> Isaiah 58:6-8.

<sup>8</sup> Matthew 10:29, 31.

<sup>9</sup> "His Eye Is On The Sparrow," words by Civilla D. Martin, music by Charles H. Gabriel, 1905.

<sup>10</sup> Tim White, *PreachingToday.com*.

<sup>11</sup> Luke 22:42.

<sup>12</sup> Lev Grossman, "Reader, My Story Ends with Freedom," *Time*, February 9, 2004, p. 75.