

“All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.”¹

That’s how Leo Tolstoy opened his classic novel, *Anna Karenina*.

Today we’re talking about a pivotal family in Scripture that nevertheless displayed a unique form of unhappiness. This is a hard story, friends.

Abraham is rightly understood as the father of three great religious traditions. They’re actually called Abrahamic faiths: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. They all recognize him for his pivotal role as the one through whom God fulfills his promise of making a great nation. We believe that nation continues to grow to this day.

Understand, then, that those who have faith are children of Abraham. (Galatians 3:7, TNIV)

That’s us, folks. You and I are children of Abraham. We are part of God’s promised great nation.

Having said that, our eminent ancestor, with all of his faith and devotion, was nevertheless quite human. Yes he was a great guy, but even great guys make bad decisions and do things they regret later on. In Abraham’s case we see it in how he behaved when it appeared that God’s promise was late in coming to pass.

God promised a great nation, but many years had passed since then, and patience is all well and good, but let’s be real, and so they thought they could speed things up.

Sarah, Abraham’s wife, took charge in a way that resulted in Abraham’s fathering a child not through Sarah but rather through Hagar, a servant girl from Egypt.

And so it unfolds. Abraham and Sarah jump the gun, and Ishmael is born to Abraham and Hagar. Scroll ahead a few years, and Isaac arrives, the child of the promise, born improbably to Abraham and Sarah. It may take awhile, in this case 25 years, but God does indeed keep his promises.

¹ Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*

By the way, don't ever pray for patience, unless you really want to learn it. Fran prayed for patience once. She'll never do that again.

As the plot thickens, Sarah, the one who initiated the short cut, now is jealous. Having previously manipulated Abraham in the first place, she now tells him this:

Get rid of that slave woman and her son. (Genesis 21:10)

Notice they don't even have names. That's one of the first steps in making enemies, by the way. People lose their names and instead become labels. Hagar is now 'that slave woman' and Ishmael is 'her son,' even though Abraham is his father.

Abraham, for his part, is of precious little help. He gives in to Sarah's demands.

Early the next morning Abraham took some food and a skin of water and gave them to Hagar. He set them on her shoulders and then sent her off with the boy. She went on her way, and wandered in the Desert. (v. 14)

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Imagine being part of something like that. Hagar, having been used as a means to an end, is now cast off along with a child 'born out of wedlock,' as we might say today. Scroll ahead a few days and find this:

When the water in the skin was gone, she put the boy under one of the bushes. Then she went off and sat down about a bowshot away, for she thought, "I cannot watch the boy die." And as she sat there, she began to sob. (Vv. 15-16)

I wonder if she prayed. If so, I wonder if she prayed in a way similar to our Psalm passage for today:

***Hear me, Lord, and answer me,
for I am poor and needy;
Guard my life, for I am faithful to you;
save your servant who trusts in you.
You are my God;
have mercy on me, Lord,
for I call to you all day long.***
(Psalm 86:1-3)

As we pick up the story we find this:

God heard the boy crying. (Gen. 21:17)

Don Postema, my spiritual director, says this is one of the earliest prayers in Scripture. Notice the progression: Hagar cries. Ishmael cries. God hears. Pay attention here, friends.

This is serious, intense, and intimate prayer. Maybe when you think God doesn't answer prayer, the real issue is you don't know how to do it. You don't know how to pray. Instead, you settle for the sentimental stuff that never goes beneath the surface.

Has God ever heard you cry? In the past few years, has anyone?

In today's story, three things happen: God hears, God responds, and God provides.

"Lift the boy up and take him by the hand, for I will make him into a great nation." Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. So she went and filled the skin with water and gave the boy a drink. (vv. 18-9)

Was the well there all along? Maybe, maybe not, but that's not the point. Instead, Hagar saw something she hadn't seen before.

Abraham, father of a great nation. Sarah, in old age, gives birth to a child. Neither one comes out well in this story. Sarah's jealousy and Abraham's helplessness almost had tragic consequences.

Who comes out on top? A servant girl. An outcast.

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Whatever may be going on in yours, remember these things:

**God Hears
God Responds
God Provides**