

Safe Havens' Sermon Contest for Seminarians

Help is Closer Than You Think!

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Subject: **Help is Closer than you Think!**

Scripture: Genesis 16:13,14 & Genesis 21:15-19 [The Message Bible]

Hymn Reference: Amazing Grace by John Newton

Domestic abuse takes place in homes throughout America every day. The stories of abuse are narratives about women and men who feel they are in a helpless and hopeless situation. One such story is about a young woman I knew.

I knew a young woman from a Christian home who did not grow up with abuse in her household. She had never seen her father hit her mother. She was popular and smart. She went to college at seventeen and at nineteen felt overwhelmed by the rigors of academic life [mostly too many parties]. She came back to the small suburban home where her parents lived and took a job in the next town over which was much larger. She went to church, sang in the choir, loved teaching Sunday School, and being a leader in the young adult group. This young woman met a man at her job. He came from a nice family who had a strong belief in God. The two began to date. They worked together during the day and went to college together at night. They were an upwardly mobile young couple. The young woman's parents did not like him, but the young man's parents liked her. They had been on a couple of dates, movies and bowling, when one day as they sat in the car in front of her house, he became upset when she entered the car because she was not wearing a skirt. He grabbed her wrist roughly as he instructed her to wear a skirt in the future. The young woman did not think much of the incident; it did not strike her as a sign that there could be a problem. Later on, when they had rented an apartment, she was in the kitchen crying because she missed her family. He came into the kitchen, took a knife and threw it at her,

missing her, denting in the wall. She still did not see this as a problem. She felt it was their first fight, surely he did not mean to actually hit her. She thought she caused the problem because of her crying. She purposed in her heart not to cry anymore.

As the years went by she did not marry but continued to live with him, she began to notice that she did not have a say in choosing the movies they saw, the restaurants they went to, the food they bought, or how the food was cooked. Over time he even began to choose her clothes often criticizing her choices. When he found a house for them to live he did not consult her on what city the house would be in or the style of the home. He just brought her to see it and asked that she sign with him for the house. She did not question the purchase. She did what she was asked. She was after all raised to be a good girl. That's what she was, a good girl. He complained that she always spoke to people while they were out, wanting her to instead be more like other women who did not talk so much. She began to purpose in her heart not to be talkative with others. Pregnant, she went home to her parents and of course he came to get her from her parents' house. Now there was a little one, a little one who did not ask her to be quiet, he just needed her. She held the baby close. The young man complained she was giving the baby too much attention. The young woman was beginning to feel as though she had lost who she was. One day during an argument about her housekeeping the baby began to cry. As she went to pick up the baby, he made a motion to hit the baby, no actual touch, just a knee-jerk reaction. The young woman placing herself between him and the baby, told him, "If you touch the baby I'll call the police." He left the room. Over the next few years, maybe once a year, the young woman was hit. Yet, she thought it is only about once a year, and only when I do not do what I am asked to do. Of course, he loves me, he goes to work for me, he buys me things, and he's always so sorry after he hits me, he only hits me on accident, only when he loses his temper.

The young woman thought, "If only I could be a better mate, keep quiet, wear the right clothes or keep the house correctly then he would not accidentally hurt me."

One day in the kitchen over a disagreement, suddenly she found herself with her feet off the ground, his hands were around her neck. Realizing this man could take her life, in a moment of clarity, she apologized. When he let her go and after he left she packed everything and left with the child.

Over the years this young woman found herself in other abusive relationships. Years later, she met another man. She felt she was older and wiser, and that this relationship would be different. The abuse began again. Her son, now ten, learned about domestic abuse and family violence in school. The teachers explained that abuse was not the child's fault and it was wrong. One day while preparing dinner the abuse began again only this time the son called 911. When the policeman arrived and told the woman that, "A child had dialed for help," something flooded the young woman. She had not protected her child, her child was protecting her. Something in the young woman changed. She understood that it was about power, control, and domination. She began to see with new eyes when she remembered what her father told her when she was young, "You are the only constant in the algebraic equation of your life. If you want something to change, *you* have to change." The young woman felt alone, unloved, and unable to make a difference in her life, but she knew she had to make a difference in her son's life. She moved into a small apartment where she and her son could be safe. She changed. Her life changed. She changed then her life changed.

The story of Hagar is found in the Hebrew Bible and it is found in the Qur'an. In the Judeo Christian tradition she is found in Genesis and in the New Testament her story is found in

Paul's Epistle. Hagar means, "stranger." In the Hebrew Bible, she was a young Egyptian woman given as a handmaid to Sarah, wife of Abraham. In Islamic tradition she is the daughter of a King, in Judeo Christian tradition she was possibly a part of the household of Pharaoh and given to Abraham as a gift. Rabbinical commentators have felt that Hagar was Pharaoh's daughter, as Pharaoh's daughter she would have belonged to the upper class and would have been educated. In Christian tradition as viewed by the Epistle of Paul, St. Augustine, Tomas Aquinas and Thomas Wycliffe, a negative image of Hagar develops as the bondswoman that represents, "The Old Law," and "The Earthly City." She was educated and of means and yet found herself in the position of being subservient, a handmaid, a cast out. Hagar, whether in the Hebrew, Islamic, Rabbinic, or Christian tradition, found herself as a stranger in a harsh environment.

As African Americans we have experienced what Renita Weems calls "exploitation and persecution." We have felt, like Hagar, exploited and persecuted. We know what it feels like to be in a strange land, with different customs, expectations, and attitudes. We know intrinsically what James Weldon Johnson means when he says, "Stony the road we trod, bitter the chastening rod, felt in the days when hope unborn had died." We have no problem identifying with being in a place where there is no water, no hope, no avenue of escape; a place where we would want not to hear the hungry cries of our children, the agony of watching the senseless violence of Black on Black crime. We understand that globally, women are considered second-class citizens of sovereign nations, states, and faith communities around the world. We, like Hagar, have been in the desert, this desert, this desert-like place of helplessness and hopelessness.

Within this desert, some of us, some of us women, some of us men, have experienced the personal desert, the personal hopelessness, the personal helplessness of being in an abusive relationship and seeing no way out. Dr. Creflo Dollar puts it like this, "It is a generational curse,

... some families unknowingly pass on certain behaviors,”¹ Some women and men are isolated from others, isolated from crucial support systems. Most of us have seen the story of Tina Turner, known as the “Queen of Rock n Roll,” how success did not stop the domestic violence she endured, the cruelty, and pain. We know the story of Mary J. Blige who also struggled with domestic violence, built a domestic violence shelter, and onstage with her new husband, thinking he had slighted her, and slugged him, drawing blood. Tyler Perry highlighted a silver screen scene in “Madea,” with his reference to, “All my life I’ve had to fight, I love Harpo, but I kill him dead before I allows him to beat me,” referring to *The Color Purple*, where Miss Celie who has only known abuse, tells Miss Sophia’s husband, Harpo, that if he loves her, he will beat her. Miss Sophia after being hit, promptly beats Harpo. Harpo, like many men who are abused, lies and says that a mule kicked him, rather than admit his wife has beat him up. We know these stories, real stories, popular literature and film and yet, we sit next to women and men today, who live these stories. This is the narrative of their lives. They are being pushed, kicked, mutilated, threatened, raped, cut, beat to the point where they no longer value themselves or their judgment. They tip-toe around the house so as not to cause a disturbance. Their children, caught up in the cycle of violence, see the violence and think it must be normal.

How do you stop the violence when you are trapped in one of these relationships? You need to know the signs. First, it is not your fault. As Pastor Creflo Dollar puts it, “Abuse is never the victim’s fault, the psychological and emotional problems of the abuser do not justify his or her explosive reaction, no one asks for, or enjoys being physically, verbally or sexually assaulted by someone who claims to love them, if you or someone you know have had the blame of violence outburst placed on your shoulders, do not believe it or accept it, it is simply not your

¹ Creflo Dollar & Taffi Dollar, *The Successful Family*, (College Park, GA: Creflo Dollar Ministries), 2002, 343.

fault."² Secondly, without professional help, the abuser will usually never stop. Third, you must seek outside, professional help to make an exit from a potentially life threatening situation. Last, to maintain control, the abuser most likely has isolated you from your family, faith community, and broader community network. You will need to find the resources in your area.

Many of us think that domestic abuse occurs all the time, so the person is likely to think that, "I" don't fit the model of being in an abusive relationship. Creflo and Taffi Dollar in their book, *The Successful Family*, outline the cycle of abuse that occurs: The cycle of violence, generally domestic violence does not occur on a continual basis but in a cycle that is made up of three phases: 1. Tension-building, 2. Acute battering incident (in which verbal, sexual and other physical assault may occur) and 3. The "Honey-moon stage."³ Reverend Al Miles in *Domestic Violence, What Every Pastor Needs To Know*,⁴ says that there are different forms of abuse: Physical Battering, Sexual Battering, Property or Pet Destruction, and Emotional Abuse/Psychological Battering. A batterer rarely exhibits only one of these forms. The goal is to "... achieve and maintain control over their intimate partner."⁵ Abuse is about control and not love. Many times the relationship starts off good and there are small signs that the person you are with is abusive.

When Hagar found herself in the desert, at the moment when Hagar felt she could go no further, when Hagar felt there was no hope for her situation, God heard the cries of her child. I began with a story about a young Christian woman whose son dialed 911 in the midst of a

² Creflo Dollar & Taffi Dollar, *The Successful Family*, (College Park, GA: Creflo Dollar Ministries), 2002, 344.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Al Miles, *Domestic Violence, What Every Pastor Needs To Know*, (Minneapolis, MN: Ortress Press), 2000, 111.

⁵ Ibid., 114.

horrible act of domestic abuse. Her child, like Hagar's son, cried out to God and God heard. There are prayer warriors, sisters, brothers, mothers, fathers crying out to God right now on someone's behalf just like that child. You may feel that God does not hear your cry. You may feel alone, trapped and like Hagar, a stranger in a foreign land. Understand this today, your breakthrough is near for God hears your cry!

That's why Renita Weems says that the story of Hagar⁶ resonates with the African American community, we know what it feels like to be outcast, to be alone, to be in a position where it is not humanly possible to survive and yet we have survived and thrived in this desert-like environment. We have walked alone silently for too many years. This is the time, this is the moment to make a difference in our lives and the lives of others. The church has been silent for far too long. This is our narrative. This is our story. This is the violence and disrespect of those born in the *imago dei*, the image of God, that is being disrespected. We need to change the direction of the narrative. We need to write a new story, with a new ending. We can open the lens to a new day. We can see light. Be ye transformed by the renewing of your minds. Romans 12:2 [New Living Translation]: "... but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God's will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect."

Home '*ought*' to be a safe place. The '*oughtness*' of home being safe may not be the '*isness*' of your reality. At the moment that Hagar had a change of mind, an epiphany, an understanding that the God who saw her, El Roi, had already provided her with all the resources she needed. This is a transformative moment that is key to a person's deliverance. In the

⁶ Renita J. Weems, *Just a Sister Away, A Womanist Vision of Women's Relationships in the Bible*, (Philadelphia, PN: Innisfree Press, Inc.), 1988, 1.

Hebrew Bible version of the Hagar story, she SEES the well, when she SEES that God SEES her. In Genesis 16:13, when Hagar identifies the power in God, she comes to understand the power within herself, "You're the God who sees me! "Yes! He saw me; and then I saw him!" She begins to SEE what God SEES, she realizes that her help, her well, her resources have been available to her all the time. Be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, has given her sight and insight into the possibilities. As the songwriter says, "I once was lost but now I'm found, was blind, but now I see!"⁷ The well is full of resources; the well is full of professionals, here in our community there is the House of Ruth, with a twenty-four hour hotline: 909-988-5559. Everyone will be given a brochure from the House of Ruth today. We have placed the number in the bathrooms and in the foyer. The well is full of resources that can help you not only survive but thrive, there is a national hotline: National Coalition against Domestic Violence (NCADV) www.ncadv.org, NWHIC, national women's health information center www.4woman.gov or 1-800-799-SAFE. These numbers and websites will be on our bulletin every Sunday.

I understand how someone might feel, listening here today because the young Christian woman I spoke of earlier was me. Once in my life I felt the church offered me no help, no solace, no understanding, and no way out. I spoke with my pastor and he recommended that I should try to be a better mate, better cook, better housekeeper, I should try and keep the peace in my household. I felt isolated and alone. I have felt like Hagar, trapped in a desert without water. It is by the grace of God that my son was taught that domestic abuse was not normal, not acceptable and he was not at fault. It was with the support of many, many friends that I escaped

⁷ "**Amazing Grace**" is a Christian hymn written by English poet and clergyman John Newton (1725–1807), published in 1779.

my situation. I felt abandoned by my faith community. No one here should feel that their faith community does not understand. Here, in this place, we understand. Just like Hagar, I did not see the resources that were near me. Just like Hagar it is when I began to see the well near me that my life and my son's life changed. "Amazing grace, will always be my song of praise, for it was grace that brought me liberty!" By the renewing of your mind, by the changing of your mind, by tapping into the help that is already near you, you too, can have freedom from a hopeless situation, **YOU TOO CAN BE FREE! OPEN YOUR EYES, HELP IS CLOSER THAN YOU THINK!**