

## Isaac and Ishmael – *Genesis 21:8-34*

**Introduction** – Abraham was promised that God would make him a great nation, that He would bless those who blessed Abraham and curse those who cursed him, and that all nations in the end would be blessed through him (Gen 12:1-2). This section reveals how all of this works together in and through the decisions and foibles and sins of men, women, and children under the Providence of God. It is all by grace. By grace, God protects the promised seed. By grace, God provides for the sons of Abraham. By grace, God fulfills, through His Providence, all His promises for Abraham, his son, and to the world.

**False Laughter and the Separation of Sons** (vv8-13) – Abraham laughed, Sarah laughed, her friends laughed with her, and the boy was named laughter. And then Ishmael laughed (v9) – but it was different. Recall that Hagar had looked with contempt upon Sarah, still childless, when Ishmael was born (Gen 16:4). At the feast where Isaac was weaned, Ishmael was probably about 16 years old – and the apple does not fall far from the tree. Ishmael’s “laughter” is a mocking laughter, filled with envy. Paul confirms this commenting, “...*he who was born according to the flesh then persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit...*” (Gal 4:29). This party for a three-year old was for the son of the promise, and the son of the bondwoman would have none of it. This is similar to what happened later between Esau and Jacob, or Joseph and his brothers. And think of Herod, responding to the news of a newborn king of Israel. “How dare God select him!”

Sarah does not come off well here (vv9-10). Abraham was distressed due to his love for Ishmael (v11). But then God came down on Sarah’s side (v12), while comforting Abraham’s fears for Ishmael’s future (v13). Ishmael, in mocking Isaac, is rejecting God’s promised plan. He wants what Isaac has and he could make a case for it; he is the firstborn. Sarah knew Isaac’s inheritance was in jeopardy and did something about it. Indeed, so did God, and so He did something about it. And Paul explains what this is all about...

**The Allegory of Two Mothers, Two Sons, Two Mountains, and Two Covenants** (Gal 4:21-31) – The son of the bondwoman and the son of the freewoman are symbolic of two covenants (4:21-24). Hagar, the slave, corresponds to births of bondage, and to the old Jerusalem (which had rejected Jesus Christ, refused to welcome the Messiah, and justified herself by her works and status – vv24-25). But those in Christ are symbolized by the child born of the freewoman, the children of promise from a mother who could not “work” any children (vv26-28). In the early church, the same struggle was going on. Those who thought salvation included works were persecuting those who believed it was all by grace through the Spirit. To that, Paul says the very “law” that the Judaizers were trying to force upon the gentile Christians taught just the opposite (v21).

In other words, Sarah stands for true believers and Hagar stands for those who trust themselves, their status, even their belonging in some way to the family of God, as their means for peace with God. She stands for everyone who thinks they deserve God’s favor though they have not submitted their hearts and lives to him. And Ishmael was showing himself to be an opponent of the Covenant of Grace, of God’s promise, and of the way of salvation in the same way the Jews of Jesus’ day had done.

**Grace with Ishmael** (vv14-21) – God remains extremely gracious with Hagar and Ishmael. Abraham rose early in obedience to God, equipped Hagar and Ishmael with needed provisions and sent them away. She wandered in the Wilderness of Beersheba (probably later named that, see v31) and most think she was trying to make her way to Egypt. Something went wrong and their water ran out in the barren desert (vv15-16). Then, for the second time, God heard her weeping and sent an angel. The Lord provides a life-giving well to a dying son. The text says, “*So God was with the lad...*” and quickly mentions future blessings (vv18-21). In the very next verse, we are told that *God is with Abraham* as well (v22). This is salvation language. We have a picture of a death-resurrection story. We have a hint of God’s longsuffering character to be gracious to those even in their rebellion.

It is worth pausing and wondering what would have happened if Ishmael had acknowledged God’s choice in electing Isaac and bowed to God’s will. We all want to be the center of “the story.” We want it to be all about us. But this world is not about us, or you, it is about Christ. It is about God’s plan to bring glory to His name. The chief end of man is to glorify God – and yes, to enjoy Him forever. But even that enjoying of God is to the praise of His glory, not ours. We remain away from the center, and if we don’t trust God, we feel as though we are mere pawns in God’s story, overlooked and neglected. That is the problem of Ishmael and all who will not believe and follow the promises and the person of God.

Ishmael should have been like John the Baptist; “*He must increase and I must decrease*” (John 3:30). He could have been like Jonathan who knew that God had anointed David and not him to be the next king of Israel. Jonathan knew what it was to trust God’s plans, to submit to His purposes, to be loyal to a covenant that was not at its center about Jonathan and instead, enjoy the friendship, loyalty, and blessing that David was to him.

**Grace with Abimelech** (vv22-34) – Abimelech is in a different place but acts in a way Ishmael should have toward Isaac. He recognized Abraham’s position with God, acknowledged God’s special promises to Abraham, and sought to be in fellowship by means of a covenant with him (vv22-24). Abraham tests that commitment by dealing with a well that had been wrongly taken by Abimelech’s people (maybe the same well God had provided for Ishmael). Abraham leads the way in bringing reconciliation by “cutting” a covenant with Abimelech and giving him seven ewe lambs (vv25-31). These “lambs of Abraham” are remembered in the name given to the well of life and peace, “Beersheba.” The covenant, the tamarisk tree, and the worship of God (vv32-34) are political and spiritual activities binding these people together with God and at peace with one another.

**What Keeps Us from Acting Like Abimelech?** - ...or like Jonathan, or John the Baptist? Is it not our unbelief that God’s plans are the best plans? Is it not our envy over what God gives others that we wished we had? Is it not our ingratitude for the grace of God and our demand that we are due far more than He has given? And is it not our short-sightedness, our “we want it now” attitude?

Envy is unbelief gone to seed. The only way Ishmael could be the promised seed was if God’s promise to Sarah was false. Envious hearts do not want God’s blessings of others to be true, or right, or just. But what Abimelech and the others named above understood was that when God is true to His promises to others it is proof, if you will believe, that He will provide blessings for you as well – the perfect blessings at the perfect time. When you are envious, you are crusading against God. “O Lord, be merciful to us – self-centered sinners at heart.”

We must learn to practice contentment and humility. And these are choices we make, not emotions we wait for. Peter commands us to “*humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God that He may exalt you in due time*” (1 Pet 5:6). One author suggested a prayer like this: “Something You have given me You are taking, or You have chosen to give it to someone else, and I trust that You will give me something better. First, make me someone who can possess something better and thank You for the chance to grow in humility. Help me let go and love it.”

This is not a command from nor a prayer to a stingy, tight-fisted God. Ishmael’s people will come to Christ. Abimelech’s as well. Jews and Gentiles, all nations, will flow to the new Jerusalem, a number that cannot be counted, kings with their kingdoms, and every knee will bow in joyful submission to the One who promised Abraham that all nations would be blessed through him. That “through him” is Jesus and only Jesus.