

INJUSTICE AND HOPE

DEVOTIONAL READING: Genesis 21:8-21
BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Genesis 21:8-21
TODAY'S SCRIPTURE: Genesis 21:8-20

I. The Last Laugh

Genesis 21:8-13

8 And the child grew, and was weaned: and Abraham made a great feast the same day that Isaac was weaned.

9 And Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, which she had born unto Abraham, mocking.

10 Wherefore she said unto Abraham, Cast out this bondwoman and her son: for the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son, even with Isaac.

11 And the thing was very grievous in Abraham's sight because of his son.

12 And God said unto Abraham, Let it not be grievous in thy sight because of the lad, and because of thy bondwoman; in all that Sarah hath said unto thee, hearken unto her voice; for in Isaac shall thy seed be called.

13 And also of the son of the bondwoman will I make a nation, because he is thy seed.

8. Isaac's weaning was an event to be celebrated. He no longer depended on his mother's breast milk for sustenance, which allowed him to spend more time with his father and the other men. This important rite of passage for any young boy was especially important for the child of promise, born in miraculous circumstances.

9. We are never told exactly what Ish-

mael said and/or did to draw the accusation of *mocking*. The Hebrew word is the same behind the name Isaac, which means "laughter."

10a. As God *cast* the first couple out of Eden (Genesis 3:24) and later drove Cain from the soil, so Sarah called *Abraham* to expel Hagar and Ishmael from their camp. We should hesitate to evaluate this action in a moral sense, given the fact of God's approval. With our knowledge that God worked through Isaac, we might be tempted to excuse Sarah's request as a pragmatic change-of-address request.

We might ask ourselves, *Do the ends justify the means?* It was cruel to cast out *the bondwoman and her son*—a son born because Sarah herself had willed Abraham to impregnate Hagar. Referring to Hagar and Ishmael in the third person rather than by name may have been Sarah's way of depersonalizing them and distancing them as legitimate recipients of Abraham's concern. Subjecting Hagar and Ishmael to starvation, exposure, and violence then seemed tolerable to Sarah in some sense.

10b. When the law is later given at Sinai, it will be mandatory for the first-born son to inherit a double portion of his father's estate at the father's death. But Sarah was unwilling to see Ishmael even as an *heir* equal to her own *son*.

11. Abraham rightly loved *his son* Ish-

mael. The father was not naïve about the dangers that the boy and his mother would face if sent away. Perhaps Abraham thought both sons would share his inheritance; after all, when God specified that Abraham's heir would be his own flesh and blood, Sarah was not mentioned (Genesis 15:4). And if Abraham understood that God intended for only *one* nation to descend from Abraham, then that man could be excused for thinking that his two sons would both contribute to that one people. Ishmael's banishment would throw all these assumptions into disarray.

12. We might conclude quickly that it's God's will for Hagar and Ishmael to move away. But recognizing three ways to speak of "God's will" is important. The first is that of God's *purposive will*. The second is that of His *prescriptive will*. The third is that of His *permissive will*.

The third of these three is in view here. In other words, God was willing to work within Sarah's desire as He moved His own plan forward. He would act in genuine partnership with *Abraham* and *Sarah*. Sometimes humans take initiative, and then God responds to their actions. This had been so in Abraham's case at least since Sarah decided to have a child by Hagar.

It is one thing to say that God wanted Sarah to cast away her servant and Abraham's son; it is another thing to say that God allowed it and saw it as a way to carry out His larger promises for His people. Those larger promises revolved around *Isaac*—not Ishmael. So God told Abraham to accept the will of his wife.

13. In working with Sarah's decision, God did not ignore Hagar or become indifferent to Ishmael. Although God was always going to fulfill His promises through Sarah's child, He chose to also *make* Ishmael *a nation* because he too was Abraham's son. Even so, Abraham left his entire estate to Isaac (Genesis 25:5). After

Sarah died, Abraham had additional sons with Keturah.

II. A Lasting Promise

Genesis 21:14-20

14 And Abraham rose up early in the morning, and took bread, and a bottle of water, and gave it unto Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, and the child, and sent her away: and she departed, and wandered in the wilderness of Beersheba.

15 And the water was spent in the bottle, and she cast the child under one of the shrubs.

16 And she went, and sat her down over against him a good way off, as it were a bowshot: for she said, Let me not see the death of the child. And she sat over against him, and lift up her voice, and wept.

17 And God heard the voice of the lad; and the angel of God called to Hagar out of heaven, and said unto her, What aileth thee, Hagar? fear not; for God hath heard the voice of the lad where he is.

18 Arise, lift up the lad, and hold him in thine hand; for I will make him a great nation.

19 And God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water; and she went, and filled the bottle with water, and gave the lad drink.

20 And God was with the lad; and he grew, and dwelt in the wilderness, and became an archer.

14a. In this instance, as in the story of Isaac's near sacrifice, Abraham's obedience to the Lord was seen in his immediate action *early the next morning*. The only record we have of *Abraham* and Ishmael together after this is when Ishmael returned to help Isaac bury their father (Genesis 25:9); whether Ishmael spent time with his dying father is unknown. There is no

record of Hagar returning to see Abraham.

14b. *Beersheba* was in southern Canaan, west of Gerar, where Abraham had settled (Genesis 20:1). Later, the entire promised land could be measured from Dan in the north to Beersheba. Hagar likely intended to return to Egypt and eventually did so (21:21). Her wandering in the desert foreshadowed Israel's own experience on their journey out of Egypt. Later Abraham would designate a well in the area by the name Beersheba (21:31).

15. We are not told how long Hagar wandered in the desert before running out of provisions, though we would expect that Abraham had sent her and *the child* away with as much as they could carry. *Cast* in this verse is the same term used when Joseph was thrown into a well and left for dead (Genesis 37:22). We can assume that for Hagar to be able to leave her teenage son *under one of the shrubs*, he had no strength to change his circumstance.

16a. Here a play on words measures this distance in terms of *a bowshot*, foreshadowing Hagar and Ishmael's own near future.

16b. The last time Hagar ran away, pregnant with Ishmael, God met her by a spring of water and promised that Ishmael would grow into manhood (Genesis 16:7-12). At that time, she called the Lord "Thou God seest me" (16:13). It must have seemed to her that God was breaking this promise and refusing to see their current plight. Not giving a thought to her own likely death, she sobbed for her *child*.

17a. *The angel of God* opened a conversation with *Hagar* as "the angel of the Lord" had done previously: with a question about her status (Genesis 16:7-8). But this time the angel didn't wait for an answer. Instead, the unanswered question is immediately followed by the command to *fear not*.

Hagar would not have the language of God's love driving out fear, but surely

her experience confirms the apostle John's words in 1 John 4:16-18. Because God loved both Hagar and Ishmael, the mother had no reason to fear for her child.

17b. We may wonder why the angel told Hagar that God *heard . . . the lad*, even though Hagar was the one weeping audibly in the previous verse. Nowhere in Genesis 21 is Ishmael referred to by name, which is a combination of the Hebrew words that mean "God hears" (Genesis 16:11). By emphasizing that He heard the teenager, God showed Hagar that He was looking after her son personally. He proved her son's name to be reassuringly true, even when it seemed that not even the boy's mother had the capacity to listen to him any longer.

18. God already had promised that Ishmael would become *a great nation*, and God planned to keep His promise. The only other person to whom God made such a promise was Abraham. Ishmael would have 12 sons as would Jacob.

19. Why Hagar could not see the *well* before is not clear. Perhaps her exhaustion and dehydration prevented her from seeing what was right before her eyes. This *water* was enough to revive Ishmael and keep her hope alive. The God whom she previously declared to be the God who "seest me" (Genesis 16:13) had opened her own eyes.

20a. *God* kept His promise to Hagar. His presence *with the lad* serves as a reminder that, though God looks after His chosen people in a special way, He also cares for people beyond that group. Indeed, God set apart Abraham's family through Isaac precisely to bless all nations.

20b. Ishmael's becoming *an archer* completes the play on words from verse 16. More importantly, it also fills out some of God's declaration about the boy's future. The last time God spoke with Hagar, He told her that Ishmael would become a wild man at odds with others (Genesis 16:12).

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

INJUSTICE AND HOPE

Into the Lesson

Why do some types of relationships tend to be more tense or more peaceful than others?

Challenging relationships or situations can make us fearful and without hope. But today's lesson describes the cure.

Into the Word

Read Genesis 21:8-20. How do you think perspective and personal emotions affected the ways the characters saw and responded to this complicated situation?

Write down examples from Scripture of God or an angel telling someone to "fear not." Find the book, chapter, and verse of the instance and read it in its context.

Into Life

Describe your experiences with God as you complete the following phrase:

Praise be to the God who . . .

Why is the meaning of the name *Ismael* ("God hears") significant?

Recall a difficult time that you were able to endure, when all hope seemed lost. How did you experience the presence of God during that time? What was the outcome?

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

Call out to the God who hears.