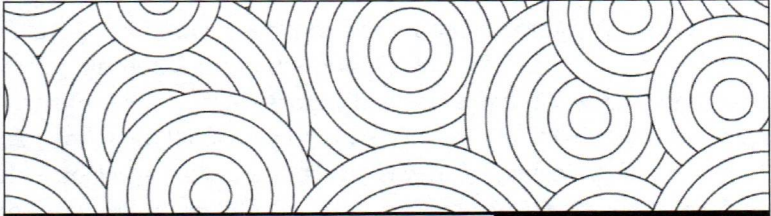


LESSON 1

THE PROMISE REALIZED

GENESIS 21:1-21



OPEN IT UP

The story of Abraham is the story of childless struggle. Despite the Lord's abundant blessings in wealth (Genesis 13:2), strength (14:14–16), and righteousness (15:6), Abraham still lacked the child of promise. Family is one of the most precious of God's blessings (Psalm 127:3). Without family, all the other blessings are not as meaningful. Abraham felt this lesson keenly, and after waiting for twenty-five years, he received the family he sought.

ISAAC'S BIRTH • GENESIS 21:1-7

Isaac's birth was the first miraculous conception in history. And the story starts with God's role. Scripture reminds us that God "visited Sarah" (Genesis 21:1). The word *visit* can be positive or negative in the Bible (Exodus 4:31; Amos 3:14). That is because the Lord's presence is good for the righteous but threatening to the wicked (Numbers 14:18). Here, the Lord's presence signals the miraculous, for Abraham and Sarah knew they were beyond the age of having children (Genesis 17:17; 18:12). With God, "all things are possible" (Mark 10:27).

Genesis 21:1 also teaches that God keeps His promises. God did "as He had said, and ... as He had spoken." Sometimes we must wait

longer than we would like, and sometimes things happen in ways we would not prefer. Certainly, Abraham was in this position. But he kept believing God would do as He said. The author of Hebrews encourages his readers, “Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful” (Hebrews 10:23).

While God worked His essential miracles to make the birth of Isaac possible, Abraham had a role to play as well. First, Abraham named the child (Genesis 21:3). Abraham and Sarah did not flip through a book of baby names and choose “Isaac”; rather, the name was a weird choice for the time (who today would name their son “He Laughs”?). Naming Isaac was an act of obedience to God (17:19). Second, Abraham “circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old” (21:4). Again, Abraham follows God’s earlier instructions, assuring that Isaac would inherit his father’s covenant relationship with God (17:10–12).

Sarah was the third one who had a role to play. She declares in her joy, “God has made me laugh, and all who hear will laugh with me” (Genesis 21:6). For her entire married life, Sarah had endured the shame of barrenness (cf. 1 Samuel 1:6–7). Now she miraculously births a son and nurses him at her advanced age (Genesis 21:7). It is instructive that Sarah’s focus is on what others will say about her and her family. This does not seem to indicate Sarah had a lesser measure of faith than her husband, but rather it teaches the incredible pain and ridicule she had endured. Isaac’s birth raised Sarah’s social status.

HAGAR AND ISHMAEL LEAVE • GENESIS 21:8-14

Children in the modern world are usually weaned off their mother’s milk at about one year old, but in the ancient Near Eastern world, that age was approximately three years old (cf. 2 Maccabees 7:27). The difference lies in the availability of transitional foods for babies. Like a “sweet sixteen” birthday, the day of a child’s weaning was a cause for celebration. This was because so many young children died in the ancient world, and weaning was considered a significant indicator the child would survive to adulthood. Therefore, it makes sense that Ishmael was not sent away from the family until Isaac reached an age of viability.

What provoked the sending away of Hagar and Ishmael is a strange event. On the day of the weaning celebration, Sarah witnesses Ishmael “scoffing” (Genesis 21:9). We must remember that Ishmael is around sixteen or seventeen years old at this point (16:16). Perhaps Ishmael was upset that he was being displaced as the heir to his father’s house, or perhaps Ishmael physically assaulted young Isaac. Paul, in fact, says Ishmael “persecuted” Isaac (Galatians 4:29). Whatever happened exactly, Sarah orders Abraham, “Cast out this bondwoman and her son; for the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son” (Genesis 21:10).

If Abraham and Sarah had a premarital contract stipulating a surrogate wife be taken in the case of the natural wife’s barrenness, then it makes sense that *Abraham* would be required to send Hagar and Ishmael away. One ancient marriage contract says exactly this: “If Kelim-ninu bears (children), Shennima shall not take another wife; but if Kelim-ninu does not bear, Kelim-ninu shall acquire a woman from the land of Lullu as wife for Shennima, and Kelim-ninu may not send the offspring away” (James B. Pritchard, ed. *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950, 220). Abraham did not wish to send Hagar and Ishmael away, but God agrees with Sarah: “Whatever Sarah has said to you, listen to her voice; for in Isaac your seed shall be called” (Genesis 21:12). The harshness is softened, however, by the promise to make “a nation” of Ishmael (verse 13). Abraham would be the father of two nations.

GOD’S PROTECTION • GENESIS 21:15-21

The tender scene of departure features Abraham offering provisions to Hagar, whom he had grown to love (Genesis 21:14). The water ran out quickly in the desert sun, and Hagar and Ishmael were near death from dehydration. Although the “boy” would have been between sixteen or seventeen years old, he gave out first, indicating Hagar’s strength (verse 15). She placed him under a desert shrub, hoping to make his last hours on earth a little more comfortable. Then she departed from him “a distance of about a bowshot” (verse 16). Ancient bows, at least as they were used in war, were not weapons for accuracy but distance, some reaching a range of around 400 yards.

A great distance must be implied here since Hagar's goal was not to "see the death" of her son (verse 16). Exhausted and emotional, Hagar "wept" (verse 16).

The name *Ishmael* means "he hears." When the angel of the Lord told Hagar to name her son, she is led to believe the name indicates that God had heard *her* cries for help (Genesis 16:11). Now the name takes on new significance as "God heard the voice of the lad" (21:17). The "angel" commands the distressed Hagar, "Arise, lift up the lad and hold him with your hand, for I will make him a great nation" (verse 18). It would take a strong woman to carry a teenage boy, but strength was a quality prized in ancient women. In addition, years of heavy lifting as Sarah's slave had probably strengthened Hagar's body. Strangely, Hagar's focus on the death of her son led her not to notice a nearby "well" (verse 19). She quickly filled the skin of water and supplied her son. Just as Isaac would produce "a great nation," so also would Ishmael (verse 18). Two great nations would emerge from Abraham to populate and dominate the desert regions of the Near Eastern world.

WRAP IT UP

The promise of Isaac was realized, but it was bittersweet for Abraham. He gained a son born from his natural marriage, but he lost a child and a woman he had grown to admire. Although Sarah demanded the pair be sent from her home, the geographical notes about the dwellings of Hagar and Ishmael prove that Abraham never lived far from them. While it would be speculative to assume Abraham snuck away to visit his first son, the fact that Isaac *and* Ishmael come together to bury their father at his death is an indication that close contact continued between the families (Genesis 25:9).



THINK ON IT

1. Describe the roles each person plays in the birth of Isaac (God, Abraham, and Sarah).

2. Why do you think so many children died in premodern times? Why was weaning important in ancient cultures?

3. If men were the “heads of household” in biblical times, why did Abraham listen to Sarah?

4. What does the name *Ishmael* mean? In what two ways did the name of Ishmael take on significance in the story of Hagar?

5. What details in the biblical narrative *might* indicate that Abraham and Ishmael continued to enjoy a relationship?