

Text: Genesis 16

Title: Lessons from Ishmael

Truth: Ishmael's birth history presents us lessons in faith.

Date/Location: Sunday December 4, 2022 at FBC

I. The Narrative – Birth of Ishmael

A. Perceived Need to Help God Leads to Sin, 16:1-4a

Starting a family was not going as planned, so Sarai suggested that they have a child by a surrogate mother, Hagar. Bad idea! Sarai is in the wrong to suggest the idea even though it was a common cultural practice. Culture is often wrong. Furthermore, Abram caved to her plan when he should have stood up to her and said “no.” Just because his wife nagged him to sin was no valid excuse to follow her idea. But Abram went ahead and took Hagar as a second wife and fathered Ishmael.

The problem of polygamy is raised here. God records it in His Word to show the consequences of it and by contrast the beauty of a well-ordered marriage. Obviously, the Bible does not smile upon their perversion of the marriage relationship, as evidenced by the consequences that follow in the family structure (16:4ff). Two-becoming-one in the marriage relationship makes it impossible for polygamy to be morally upright or workable.

B. Sin Leads to Consequences, 16:4b-6

After becoming pregnant, the maid, Hagar, began to think of herself as an equal to Sarai. After all, she was married to the head of the house as well as she was. So, she began to despise her mistress.

Sarai could not take it now that there was a child-bearing rival in the home who was able to have a child while she was not. The adage “you made your bed, now lie in it” applies here. She should have thought of this beforehand!

But Sarai brought the LORD into it: “The LORD judge between you and me.” What exactly does the Lord have to do with this? I do not see her faring any better than Abram in this judgment, except that he is the head of the household and has the final responsibility.

Abram cannot take his wife's complaining and so he puts Hagar under her hand to do with as she wishes. In other words, he delegates his head-of-home responsibility to his wife. Wrong again. Sarai drives Hagar away from their home. Think of it: a pregnant woman treated like that. Abram should have been stronger and more kind, and Sarai not so mean.

C. God's Directions for Hagar, 16:7-14

In an encounter full of God's care and grace, God appears to Hagar (see ch. 21 for the second time this happens). God asks her where she came from, and where she is going. This is not for His benefit, but for hers. Hagar answers that she was fleeing from Sarai. But she did not answer about her destination, perhaps because she did not have one in mind.

The Lord told her to return to Sarai and to be submissive despite her harshness. This is instructive for us who may be in a situation that we believe to be harsh—of course not to stay in a dangerous situation, but perhaps an employer or parent is a bit over-zealous in their management style in your view. Can you live with that—like Jesus submitted to people who did not deserve His submission?

God also promised that her son would have many descendants as well. God set it up this way because Ishmael was also a son of Abram (as 21:13 tells us), so that he received blessing on account of that. He did not deserve it—that is why it is grace.

The blessings and good things we receive are because God has ordained them. Sometimes God directly blesses you. But sometimes the blessings you receive are because of other people—other people who pray for you, the ones to whom you are related, and the people who help you.

In wording that reminds me of Matthew 1:23, the Lord tells Hagar that she will call the boy Ishmael. The component parts of the name in Hebrew mean exactly what God says in the next phrase: the Lord has heard. (shma is the verb to hear, el is the word for God.) The Lord paid attention to Hagar's affliction and did something kind about it.

God then informs Hagar that her son will be a wild man who is a foe to everyone around him. What must a mother think about this!

Hagar expressed her experience with God by calling God by the name "The God who sees." This was frequently done in the OT. God can be characterized or named by many of His activities. How gracious that He saw Hagar in her hour of need and helped her by providing guidance.

D. Birth of Ishmael, 16:15-16

Hagar obeys the Lord's command to return to the household of Abram. When Ishmael was born, Abram was 86 years old. This was 11 years after he left Ur of the Chaldeans (12:4). His son Isaac would not be born until Abram was 100, about 14 years later.

II. Lessons from Ishmael

We learn a lot from the *wrong* actions of others, and God's word does not sugarcoat such actions—to give us the clearest lessons.

- A. Trying to provide in the strength of the flesh, outside of God's will, will lead to problems. Doing so will involve sin—for no other reason than we are doing things apart from faith. Whatever is not of faith is sin (Romans 14:23). Lying for your work or to cover up your own sin or seeking pleasure outside of God's ordained means of marriage...involve sin.
- B. God graciously cares for downtrodden and oppressed people. He does not always do so, however, before they must flee or experience major problems. We see this in the Egyptian bondage, and in the book of Judges, and in other times in world history.
- C. God hears—remember the name *Ishmael*. Remember this truth before you blame his line of Abram's descent for the problems in the Middle East or terrorism or whatever. It is far too easy to fall into an ethnocentric viewpoint.
- D. Sometimes God requires submission when it is difficult. Submission in a family or work or school situation is not always happy, but it is necessary, if for nothing else than to "get by."
- E. You can make submission more difficult by the things you do. "Her mistress became despised in her eyes." If Hagar had been humble and kind about it, she would have fared much better. Wisdom would have taught her that it is difficult enough for Sarai, knowing that she cannot have children, that no further insult should be added to the situation.
- F. Go with what you *know*. Abram had talked to the Lord about an heir (ch. 15) and God told him directly that a natural-born son would be the heir—not a servant in his household. Abram should first have sought God about his wife's plan to see if it was appropriate. On top of that, he should have trusted God to provide through his wife. In addition, when God has spoken, run with that information, not with other stuff you make up along the way! God had taught about the sanctity of marriage, and in this special case about Abram having a son naturally; so, Abram should have stuck with God's plan.

III. Illustration from Ishmael, Galatians 4:21-31

- A. The apostle Paul uses the historical (not allegorical) account of Hagar and Ishmael to illustrate a very important theological point.

B. The illustration is a head-to-head comparison, like this:

Hagar & Ishmael symbolize:	Abram & Isaac symbolize:
Children of the flesh	Children of promise
Reliance on self	Reliance on God
Born according to flesh	Born according to the Spirit
Bondage	Freedom
Illegitimate heir	Legitimate heir
Covenant at Sinai	Abrahamic Covenant
Supposed salvation by works of the law	Salvation by grace through faith

Let me be crystal clear: the text in **Genesis** does *not* say the things above. It is a historical account of real events that occurred. Paul took those events and in **Galatians** made parallels with them to theological realities that he was teaching. Namely, that we must not be entangled with a way of works and law when true salvation comes by the way of trust in Jesus Christ. If you attempt to be made right with God by your own keeping of any law or any moral code, you will be cast out because that is insufficient.

C. In Bible “language” when we say something is “of the flesh” we mean it is characterized by sin and human effort, in contrast to reliance upon God. Christians do live and work and think and plan and all that, but they do so in an environment saturated in trusting God through Christ. We do not ultimately rely on our flesh. Abram and Sarai did rely on their flesh, even though they had an explicit promise of God. The historical account of Hagar and Ishmael being “cast out” parallels what will happen with those who try to go with the flesh as the means of spiritual salvation. They will be cast out too. They will not be heirs. But not because of meanness on the part of God, like Sarai and Abram were mean to the pregnant Hagar. The analogy breaks down here. The motivation is not evil: rather, it is holiness. God is *just* to punish sin and to keep it away from his eternal people, so they do not have to suffer it forever and ever. Ultimately, holiness does demand an answer to the problem of evil, and that answer is to separate the sinful and the holy forever. Only those who wish to be apart from God will have that sin-filled existence as their portion.

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