

**Text:** Genesis 21:1-34

**Title:** God's Promise and Protection

**Truth:** Isaac is born and Ishmael moves out—both to advance God's plan.

**Date/Location:** January 29, 2023 at FBC

## Introduction

### I. Isaac's Birth, 21:1-8

- A. This small section gives the mostly unadorned account of Isaac's birth, circumcision, and weaning. He would have been several years old when he finally was weaned from his mother's milk and onto all solid foods (see a similar situation for young Samuel, 1 Samuel 1:20-24).
- B. The wonderful and miraculous nature of this situation was that "the LORD visited Sarah as He had said, and...did for Sarah as He had spoken." The miraculous part is that she could once again have a baby. The wonderful part is that God kept His word. This is how it always is with the God of the Bible—the only true God, the only being outside of the created realm, the only One Who has the power to implement His promises and the wisdom to make those promises in the first place. He also did it in the time he had set before—in chapters 17 and 18 He said it would be at a certain time next year, and it was. God keeps His word always, whether for good or ill, reward or retribution, blessing or cursing, big or small. In this case, the promise kept was in one sense rather small—the birth of a child to one family in the ancient near east. In another sense, it was quite large, for the nation of Israel has impacted the history of the world in disproportionate measure, especially since the Messiah arose from Israel to bring salvation to the world. The promises of God are so intermixed, so entwined with one another that the whole network of them stands or falls on the grand wisdom and power of God.
- C. Abraham carried out the required circumcision on the eighth day, which you will recall from chapter 17 was God's commanded "sign" for the Abrahamic covenant for all the descendants of Abraham. This is good—God did what He said, and Abraham did what he was told to do.

- D. Abraham named him Isaac, which comes from the verb for “laughter” (17:17, 18:12). God instructed him to name the boy Isaac (17:19, 21), to remind Abraham of his initial reaction to God’s promise. This reminder served for decades as a call to faith in the promises of God, and forever after it reminds the nation of Israel of the same thing every time they say, “Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” The name *Isaac* is in this way a warning against a faithless response to God’s word. You might laugh at God’s word, but God will have the last “laugh” (Psalm 2:4, 59:8).
- E. Two verses focus on Sarah’s response. They remind us that the laughter that was faithless was turned into laughter of joy and thanksgiving at a fulfilled promise. She “could not believe” that she was blessed with a child—to bear the child, to nurse the child, to raise the child—at her age of about 90 years old. You can imagine, I trust, if you are well into your 40s or even 50s or beyond if you and your spouse had another child. After getting over the shock of it, you would shake your head and laugh about it!
- F. Think of the valley of difficulty that we walk through in this life and the promises that God makes to His children that when they complete this journey, they will come out into the glorious light of heaven. Then we too shall laugh a laughter of joy and delight (Psalm 126:1-3).
- G. As far as chronology is concerned, the birth occurred roughly around 2065 B.C.

## **II. Hagar and Ishmael Pushed Out, 21:9-21**

- A. The occasioning incident for Hagar and Ishmael’s departure was that Ishmael scoffed at Isaac and his mother Sarah. This was highly offensive because it was ridicule. It was harsh and disrespectful toward the younger boy and did not give due honor to him as the son of God’s promise. Mom Sarah did not take it well.
- B. Ishmael was about 14 years of age at the time that Isaac was born (at his own circumcision a year earlier in 17:25 he was 13). It appears that Sarah had another fit of jealousy and anger at Hagar and her son Ishmael for being so disrespectful. Now that Ishmael was old enough, she was angry that he might take some of the

inheritance of her son. Whatever exactly were her motivations, it is enough to say that she was very upset.

- C. Abraham was extremely displeased about his wife's attitude. Likely he was not as emotionally invested in the entire situation as she was. And he knew that Ishmael was not in line to get most of the inheritance anyway despite being "firstborn."<sup>1</sup> What he probably wanted was peace in the household instead of strife. If so, that is good thinking on his part.
- D. In verse 12, God assured Abraham that it would be OK to put Hagar and her son Ishmael out of the clan and have them move on to their own place. This solidified the reality that the promised offspring (*seed*) was Isaac—not Ishmael.
- E. God knew two things that Abraham did not: 1) that He would take care of Hagar and Ishmael in the wilderness; and 2) this would be later used by the apostle Paul as an allegory in Gal. 4:19-31 as a way of explaining how believers are children of promise, of faith, not of the law nor bondage. Note that Paul is not interpreting the passage allegorically, but he is using it as a basis to *create* his own allegory to explain the problem of the Galatians' turning back to the law (bondage) instead of realizing their glorious freedom in Christ.
- F. God promised once again to make a nation of Ishmael (17:20) for the sake of Abraham. Ishmael was blessed not because of his own worthiness, but because of his association with Abraham. We should add that Abraham himself was not blessed by God because of *his* own worthiness, but because of God's grace.
- G. When Hagar and Ishmael were thrown out, Abraham gave them some supplies and sent them out of the family compound. They left and wandered in the wilderness of Beersheba. Beersheba was south and a bit west of Jerusalem. They were looking for a new place to call home. She and her teenaged son were homeless! That does seem harsh, does it not? And then they ran out of water.

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<sup>1</sup> In the next chapter, God describes Isaac as Abraham's "only son" because he was the only natural-born son, the son of promise, the one not gotten by sinful means. As such, Isaac was the true heir.

- H. When their water was gone, they thought for sure they would die of dehydration in the heat, so she had Ishmael sit in the shade of a shrub. He may have been more affected by the heat than her, not being as “weathered,” so to speak, as she was since she was older. She placed him there and then went a distance away so that she could not see his final suffering as he died of thirst. The distance of a bowshot could have been a couple hundred yards for an accurate shot, or many hundreds of yards if a highly arched shot not particularly seeking accuracy. She cried because she was certain death was their eventual fate.
- I. But it was not her cries alone that God heard. The Bible tells us that God heard the voice of the lad. He cried out as well for relief. He and she both certainly would know from Abraham about the true God, and could have called out to Him, despite his mockery of the promised child from God. Hopefully his tune changed from scoffing when the situation was desperate. However, as far as he knew, he was still in this situation because Sarah pushed him out. He probably did not realize that God had arranged all of this.
- J. God was attentive to the prayer of these afflicted ones. He will hear your prayers too if you offer them genuinely. He told mom to go back to the child and hold him up and help him, for he would become a great nation. God again intervened in answer to Hagar’s prayer (see 16:7-14 for the first time). He then showed her a well of water so that they would be sustained.
- K. Over the ensuing years, he dwelt in the wilderness, eventually moving into the Wilderness of Paran. This place may have been in the Sinai Peninsula west of modern-day Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Remember Genesis 16:12 prophesies that Ishmael will be a wild man and will be a fighter or somehow an unfriendly fellow. He became an archer. That is likely how he hunted for food. Hagar guided him into a marriage with a woman from Egypt so he would have companionship, a helper, and a mother for children.

### **III. Abraham and Abimelech (Part 2), 21:22-34**

- A. This portion tells us of a covenant cut between Abraham and Abimelech, where Abimelech asked Abraham to deal well with him

and his offspring, since they saw that Abraham was a powerful man. They had dealt with Abraham kindly (remember chapter 20?!).

- B. Abraham in verse 24 did make an oath to treat Abimelech with fairness. This is an early implementation of the golden rule (Matt. 7:12, Luke 6:31). The golden rule itself is a summary of the Law of Moses, in the flavor of Matthew 22:37-40 which tell us about our duty toward God and our fellow human beings.
- C. Does this agreement made between a believer and a pagan violate a godly principle somehow? What I mean is this: is Abraham now unequally yoked with an unbeliever (2 Cor. 6:14). I do not see this agreement as a partnership of that level. We all must interact with people of different religious convictions in this world, and some “operating agreements” are required for that. Commerce or international peace agreements are not necessarily unequal yokes. If they promote a “quiet and peaceable life” (1 Timothy 2:2) then they are good. If they lay upon the Christian unethical responsibilities or give away liberties that are required to exercise our faith or protect that quiet and peaceable existence, then such agreements must be rejected.
- D. Somewhat later, there was a dispute about a well of water that Abimelech’s servants had “appropriated” for themselves. Abimelech knew nothing about the incident, so he can say that it was not his fault nor was it condoned by him. I suspect he had a good talk with his servants after that, but often the leader is the last to know some important matter. It was about this well that Abraham gave seven ewe lambs to Abimelech to remind him about their agreement.
- E. Abraham named the place Beersheba (well of the oath) because of this covenant. They completed making the covenant there and Abraham stayed in the land of the Philistines for a while. He planted a tamarisk tree as a reminder of the treaty.
- F. This was also a place where Abraham worshipped God and prayed to Him. I wonder if Abraham offered thanks that once again the covenant-making God protected Abraham from the inhabitants of the land. Abraham called God the Everlasting God, the “El Olam”

which means the God who is God into the far future, the God who is eternal. That is contrasted with us, who are in our present bodies not eternal. We are extraordinarily finite. Our spirit lives on somewhere forever, but our bodies expire—with a disease, sometimes in months or years; without food, in weeks; without water, in days; without oxygen, in minutes.

## **Conclusion**

God promised a son to Abraham and Sarah, and He brought that promise to fruition. God protected Hagar and Ishmael as a corollary benefit to His blessing of Abraham. And God protected Abraham from the unbelieving people around Him in the promised land.

What do you suppose God has done and can do for *you*?

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