



**Sunday School Lesson Summary for September 23, 2007
Released on September 19, 2007**

"Abraham, Hagar, and Ishmael"

Printed Text: Genesis 21:9-21

Background Scripture: Genesis 21:9-21

Devotional Reading: Genesis 16

Genesis 21:9–21

9 And Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, which she had borne 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.

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 Beer-sheba.

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 lifted 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.

21 And he dwelt in the wilderness of Paran: and his mother took him a wife out of the land of Egypt.

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each student will be able to:

1. Outline the facts regarding Abraham's dismissal of Hagar and Ishmael.
2. Summarize the significance of God's promise in Genesis 21:13.
3. Suggest some ways for his or her church to reach out to Muslims or other non-Christians with the gospel.

Introduction -- Outsiders and Insiders

"Call me Ishmael." So begins the famous novel *Moby-Dick*, by Herman Melville. Melville employs many biblical names and images to tell a story of self-destruction of the obsessive Captain Ahab. Ishmael, the narrator, is always the outsider, not quite part of the main drama unfolding around him. His namesake, the Ishmael of Genesis, also ended up being an outsider.

Today, Muslims see Abraham as their father in the faith, much like Jews and Christians do (compare Romans 4:16). Muslims, however, trace their spiritual lineage back to Abraham through Ishmael, the son who was cast out of Abraham's household. According to the Qur'an (or Koran), the holy book of the religion of Islam,

Abraham was told by God to take Ishmael and his mother, Hagar, to a far land. They traveled many days until they came to a deserted place.

Unbeknownst to them, so the story goes, this was the spot where Adam had built the first place to worship God. Abraham left Hagar and Ishmael there. When Hagar and Ishmael were near death from lack of water, the Qur'an claims that the youngster began to kick in the sand, and a well sprang up. This became the well Zamzam, and the city that grew around it is known today as Mecca. Muslims falsely believe that a descendant of Ishmael named Mohammed restored true worship of God at this site in the seventh century A.D.

Unrest and violence in the Middle East today are partly fueled by different ideas concerning how people are connected to Abraham and his sons. Jews claim the side of Isaac, the child of promise according to Genesis. Muslims believe that their ancestor Ishmael was the primary child of promise blessed by God. Each side sees itself as the "insider" and the other as the "outsider."

This week's lesson looks at the story of Abraham, Hagar, and Ishmael from the Bible's point of view. It is a sad story of a family broken apart because of foolish behavior and bitterness. We grieve with Abraham as he is forced to choose between his two sons. Many of those studying this lesson have experienced the pain of family fighting and break-up. Today's text offers hope to us in that we see that God did not curse one side of a family squabble while blessing the other side.

Lesson Background

Last week's lesson focused on how Abraham and Sarah were able to have a son in spite of advanced age. Regarding Sarah specifically, we learned of many admirable qualities: her faith, her courage, and her sense of humor and joy.

Yet there was another side to Sarah that was not so admirable. Today we see a headstrong woman, who could be jealous and scheming. In the end one of her schemes backfired, and her jealousy caused her to act with cruelty.

Sarah and Abraham lived in a world where it was common for households to include slaves. One of their slaves was an Egyptian girl named Hagar (Genesis 16:3). Hagar was Sarah's personal attendant. When Abraham and Sarah's attempts to produce a child were unsuccessful, Sarah hatched a scheme to remedy the problem: she offered to let Abraham have Hagar as a type of slave-wife, hoping this union would yield a child.

Sarah's logic in this seems strange to us. Why would a wife willingly allow her husband to have an intimate relationship with another woman? This seems to be a recipe for disaster! But the logic of this practice, common at the time, went

something like this: "If my slave produces a child, that child will be mine, just like his mother is my property." Sarah thought she could have a son by a secondary way, and thus please her husband.

This plan went forth, and Abraham and Hagar conceived the baby that was to become Ishmael. But the plan backfired on Sarah in two ways. First, becoming pregnant had an unanticipated effect on Hagar: she began to think that she was better than Sarah (Genesis 16:4). Hagar had been successful at becoming pregnant, something Sarah had failed in; this ruined the relationship between the two women and ensured that Ishmael would never be accepted by Sarah. Second, Ishmael himself displayed his own arrogance after Isaac was born. This is where today's lesson begins.

Departure of Hagar and Ishmael (Genesis 21:9-14)

1. Why was Sarah upset with Ishmael? (v. 9)

Ishmael, the son of Hagar the Egyptian, is recorded as mocking. Although today's text does not give a reason why Ishmael was mocking, there are a few possibilities. Perhaps Ishmael was mocking Sarah for her old age. Sarah was 90 years old when she gave birth to Isaac. Ishmael probably learned this behavior from his mother, Hagar. We do not know the exact age of the boy, but Genesis 17:25 indicates that he was at least 13 years old. This shows that he was old enough to poke fun and immature enough not to know that this is a dangerous practice.

2. What did Sarah ask to be done with Hagar and Ishmael? (v. 10)

After witnessing the abuse of her little boy, Isaac, the tension in the household of Abraham grew to a climax. At this point Sarah demanded that Abraham "cast out this bondwoman and her son." Notice that Sarah does not refer to Hagar and Ishmael by name in this verse, so we can conclude that Sarah wants them expelled from the family.

In chapter 16 of Genesis, Sarah doubted God's promise of a son. She instructed Abraham to use Hagar, her maidservant, to get a son. In Sarah's mind, this would mean that God's promise would be fulfilled. After Hagar bore Abraham a son, then Sarah began to get jealous, and she treated Hagar harshly as a result.

3. At this point, what was Sarah's primary concern regarding her son's future?

After observing Ishmael's attitude towards Sarah and Isaac, she thought that Ishmael's assertive behavior might indicate that a time was coming when the two sons would vie for the inheritance. It was better now to make it clear which son

would be the heir than to make a major conflict to erupt after Abraham and Sarah were gone.

4. How did Abraham feel about sending Ishmael away? (v. 11)

Abraham is now facing a tough decision. Does Abraham listen to his wife and send his firstborn son, Ishmael away with Hagar or does he try to keep them in the household and try to work things out? As a parent, Abraham is naturally attached to his flesh and blood. Sarah is rejecting his biological son by another woman. Abraham was a willing accomplice in the unwise impregnation of Hagar. The fact that he tried to "push" God's timetable in trying to obtain a son now brings him grief.

5. What reassurance did Abraham receive from the Lord concerning his decision? (v. 12)

In this moment of great distress, God does not abandon Abraham. God arrives on the scene to offer Abraham a solution. Abraham was probably praying for a resolution to his family problems. He wanted everyone to get along in his household, and he probably sought God to make it happen.

God's response was not what Abraham expected. The Lord instructs Abraham to listen to his wife and send Hagar and Ishmael out of the household. This family was not going to be restored. God had a bigger purpose that required Hagar and Ishmael out of the picture. He reminds Abraham that he would become a nation through Isaac, not Ishmael.

Families can be horribly dysfunctional. They can bear the scars of abuse, betrayal, and tragedy. However, God does not abandon us, even in the darkest days. Yet, while God is at work, He does not always restore a family to an earlier state that seemed to be better. The mess that had been created in Abraham's family by several factors is not going to be fixed by God as we may think of fix or repair in human terms. Instead, we will see God's unfailingly love each family member and do what is best to care for him or her.

6. What promise was made concerning Ishmael and his posterity? (v. 13)

Although God has plans for Isaac, He also has plans for Ishmael. God did not have to bless Ishmael because of Abraham. After all, Ishmael was conceived through illegitimate means, but God is so gracious that He chose to bless Ishmael anyway. His descendants will also become a nation. He will share in the blessings of Abraham, his father. However, Abraham will experience a little firsthand joy in the successes of Ishmael's life, for the expulsion is about to proceed.

7. Where did Hagar and Ishmael end up wandering? Where was this? (v. 14)

Abraham immediately follows God's command. The very next morning, Abraham gives Hagar food and water and sends them to the desert in Beersheba. Note that Abraham did not send Hagar and Ishmael away with nothing. He gave them what they needed so that they would survive. Although this may seem cruel, Hagar was now free from her mistress and whatever pressures she must have experienced competing against Sarah for Abraham's attention and affection.

Beersheba was in the land of Canaan. We should note that the land of Canaan was largely undeveloped at this time. Hagar has no place to go, and she ends up in the wilderness of Beersheba. This is in the southern part of Canaan, the beginning of the cruel Negev desert. Abraham later sees Beersheba as a place of worship (Gen. 21:33). Centuries later, it will be the southern extremity of Israel.

Distress of Hagar and Ishmael & Their Deliverance (Genesis 21:15-21)

8. What happened when they ran out of water? How did the Lord meet their needs? (v. 15-19)

Finding food and water is no easy task in a desert. The bottle of water given to Hagar upon her departure would have been a large skin that should have supplied their needs for several days until they came upon an oasis or another source of water. However, at some point, "the water was spent in the bottle." (v. 15).

To protect her son from the heat and to avoid further dehydration, Hagar put him under one of the bushes. Even on the hottest days, the shade from a tree or bush can provide some relief (Jonah 4:5-6).

Unable to bear the thought of watching her son die in the desert heat, Hagar went a short distance away and began to weep. Apparently, Ishmael was also weeping (v. 17), for he must have realized that death awaited both of them in this desolate locale.

In an earlier episode in Genesis, Hagar was rescued by the angel of the Lord (16:6-11). At that time God promised Hagar, "I will multiply thy seed exceedingly, that it shall not be numbered for multitude" (v. 10). Under the present circumstances, she was probably wondering whether that would even come to pass. Could it be that God would not fulfill His promise to Hagar?

The prophet Isaiah said, "Seek the Lord while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near." (Isaiah 55:6). God heard the lad's voice in verse 17 of Genesis 21, and He appeared unto Hagar. Though Hagar and Ishmael were on the verge of death, God intervened. God is never early, nor is He ever late; He is always right on time.

Since God knows our needs before we ask (Matt. 6:8), He makes provisions for those needs to be met ahead of time. While she may have thought that they had been aimlessly wandering in the desert, they were actually being led to the very place where their needs would be supplied.

After reminding Hagar of God's promise, the angel instructed Hagar to comfort the child (v. 18). Then "God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water." She filled her bottle, and she gave her son much need water (v. 19).

9. How did Ishmael distinguish himself later in life? What else do we know about him? (v. 20)

Rescued from what seemed to be imminent death, Ishmael "grew, and dwelt in the wilderness, and became an archer." Living in the unpopulated region of the desert of Paran (southwest of Beersheba), Ishmael distinguished himself as a bowhunter. An earlier prophecy concerning Ishmael said he would be "a wild man; his hand [would] be against every man, and every man's hand against him" (16:12).

Where Hagar and Ishmael lived in the wilderness of Paran was not far from Egypt, and a wife could be conveniently obtained for the young man. Besides, Hagar was an Egyptian herself and most likely thought that an Egyptian bride was the best possible choice for her son. "As great of an archer as he was, he did not think he could take his aim well, in the business of marriage, if he proceeded without his mother's advice and consent" (Henry).

10. What analogy did the Apostle Paul draw from the lives of Hagar and Ishmael?

The apostle Paul uses the life and person of Abraham to illustrate the truths of the gospel and its application to the people of the church. In Galatians 4, Paul employs the family troubles of the patriarch to explain our freedom in Christ. You must know the story of today's lesson to make sense of his powerful argument.

Paul's primary agenda in Galatians is to refute the idea that Christians are required to keep the Jewish law. For Paul, this obligation would negate the freedom we have in Christ. One way Paul makes his point is to use a story from the first book of the law (Genesis) to illustrate the importance of freedom in God's plan of redemption.

Since Hagar is a slave, her son would also be a slave. Those trusting in the Mosaic law for redemption were still in bondage to the law. Conversely, Sarah was free, as was her son, thus picturing those who freely trust in Christ for salvation. Therefore, we are not children of the slave but of the free woman. Or as Jesus put it, "If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed" (John 8:36).

Conclusion -- Children of the Free Woman

We have seen how Abraham's life turned around when he chose to obey God under all circumstances and realized that His plans for him were best.

God is a God of promises, and He always keeps His promises. He did not abandon His promise to Abraham when Abraham attempted to keep his line going by having a child with a slave woman. The Lord was still faithful to provide through both Isaac and Ishmael, despite Abraham's foibles.

Likewise, God will not abandon us, even when our families—either our physical family or our spiritual family—are in shambles. God's love for us is proven through His gift of His only Son, Jesus. Even when the animosity among the members of a fractured family runs very high, God's love is constant and unchangeable. In times of personal adversity, we are well reminded to "keep yourselves in the love of God" (Jude 1:21).

Prayer

Father, You show us unity in Your very person; we show You division in our lives and families. May You continue to heal our rifts and calm our conflicts. We pray this in the name of Your only Son, Jesus, amen.

Thought to Remember

God can work in the midst of conflict.

Anticipating Next Week's Lesson

Our lesson next week gives us insight into how God worked in the lives of Isaac and his wife Rebekah. It is a narrative of romance and intrigue. Study Genesis 24.

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