

Genesis 21:9-21

Hagar and Ishmael Banished

“And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose” (Romans 8:28). This verse, to which we hold so securely when difficult times come upon us, can also be easily misunderstood. The promise is not that God will work things out as we hope, but that God will work things out for the best. Those are not always the same things. That is, what we want is not often what is best for us, even if what we want seems good and right. God’s promise is simply and straightforwardly that no matter how circumstances seem at any given moment, He is active and working in them to bring about His perfect will for our lives.

The faithfulness of God had been demonstrated with Isaac’s birth. Now the child had been weaned and, to celebrate, Abraham provided a great feast for friends and servants. It should have been a perfectly wonderful time. The promised heir had survived the first few years of life and was growing. But it was not. Hagar and Ishmael were unable to take much part in the celebration. They were rivals to Sarah and Isaac, but they also would be blessed by God because of their relationship to Abraham (Genesis 16:10). Yet these two found themselves outside of the covenant promise. But God was working to bring about His perfect will in their lives as well.

Trouble in the Family

It was, perhaps, at the great celebration that Abraham gave on the occasion of Isaac being weaned that “Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, mocking” (v. 9). The joyful celebration was interrupted by a family quarrel. The word used for ‘mocking’ can also mean ‘playing’ so there is difficulty in discerning whether Ishmael was misbehaving or Sarah was simply being jealous.

In the Old Testament the term is variously translated in the context of the tender caresses of Isaac and Rebekah (Genesis 26:8), the joyful celebrations of the Israelites around the golden calf (Exodus 32:6), and even a contest in the military arts (2 Samuel 2:16). Perhaps Ishmael was playing innocently with his younger half-brother, and Sarah resented the son of a slave woman considering himself part of the family. Perhaps Ishmael was trying to draw some attention to himself and shift the focus from the little boy, though Isaac was undoubtedly oblivious to the reason for the celebration.

Yet, while there is no linguistic reason to assume that Ishmael was behaving badly toward Isaac, it is not difficult to imagine the resentment which Ishmael felt toward Isaac, and the occasion of a celebration in the toddler’s favor could not have improved his mood. So, while this may have been simply jealousy on Sarah’s part, it is more likely to think that Ishmael’s behavior was, in fact, mocking or ridiculing the young heir. While neither Sarah nor Abraham were above inexcusable behavior, we have already witnessed this in previous narratives, but here let us give Sarah the benefit of the doubt. Perhaps she was even reminded of Hagar’s behavior toward her when Hagar conceived a child by Abraham (Genesis 16:4). Paul seemed to place the blame on Ishmael when he wrote, “but as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so it is now also” (Galatians 4:29). The persecution Isaac suffered may have been no more than teasing the child did not even understand.

But his mother did understand. “Therefore she said to Abraham, ‘drive out this maid and her son, for the son of this maid shall not be an heir with my son Isaac’” (v. 10). Sarah was so angry that she could use neither the mother’s name nor her son’s. She referred simply to “this maid and her son” (v. 10). The phrasing is similar to that used to “drive out” Adam and Eve from the garden or Cain from the civilized world. Ironically, it is also the same word that would be used by Pharaoh to expel the Hebrews from Egypt (Exodus 6:1), though here it was an Egyptian being driven out of a Hebrew household.

Perhaps Sarah thought Abraham might divide his inheritance between the two boys. Law codes of the time, such as that of the great Babylonian king Hammurabi (18th century BC), insisted that the sons of servants were eligible to inherit property. One example states that,

“if his wife bear sons to a man, or his maid-servant have borne sons, and the father while still living says to the children whom his maid-servant has borne: ‘my sons,’ and he count them with the sons of his wife; if then the father die, then the sons of the wife and of the maid-servant shall divide the paternal property in common.”

Perhaps Sarah believed Ishmael might even get the larger portion as the elder son. That also would not have been unusual in the ancient world where primogeniture was frequently the custom. No doubt all parties understood the family strife that such tension would cause. Perhaps Abraham and Sarah had already discussed the matter, Abraham was not, after all, a very young man, and surely he and Sarah had discussed disposition of the family possession should anything happen to the aged patriarch.

Interestingly, future narratives of the family such as that of Jacob and Esau or Joseph and his brothers demonstrate that this particular family was not above extraordinary demonstrations of sibling rivalry.

Even Sarah's language evidenced her renunciation of Hagar and Ishmael. Though by custom, Sarah could have claimed Ishmael as *her* son due to the fact that Hagar was *her* servant, she did not do so. Ishmael was entirely and exclusively Hagar’s offspring. Sarah made no claim upon him. The “maid and her son” had no place with “my son Isaac.” (v. 10). This verbal distinction was used by later Christian writers to symbolize the difference between those chosen by God and those that are not.

²⁸And you brethren, like Isaac, are children of promise. ²⁹But as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so it is now also.

³⁰But what does the Scripture say?

“Cast out the bondwoman and her son,

For the son of the bondwoman shall not be an heir with the son of the free woman.”

³¹So then, brethren, we are not children of a bondwoman, but of the free woman”

(Galatians 4:28-31).

Caught between his wife and the mother of his first born child, Abraham’s position was at the very least unenviable. So we are cannot be surprised to learn that “the matter distressed Abraham greatly because of his son” (v. 11). But for which son was Abraham distressed? Was he upset for Isaac because he might be overlooked or for Ishmael because he was the one to be banished? Probably the latter. Abraham knew that Isaac was the child of the promise. His future was secure. Yet, Ishmael was his firstborn, and he was not merely to be passed over, but sent away. It is worth noting that while the eloquence of the verse

speaks of Abraham's heartbreak over Ishmael, it does not mention any distress over his wife's hurt feelings.

As we will see, God did not always practice strict adherence to the eldest child representing the chosen line, think of Esau and Jacob or Manasseh and Ephraim. Yet the later Mosaic law did require a double portion be given to the eldest son regardless of the father's affection.

“¹⁵If a man has two wives, the one loved and the other unloved, and both the loved and the unloved have borne him sons, if the firstborn son belongs to the unloved, ¹⁶then it shall be in the day he wills what he has to his sons, he cannot make the son of the loved the firstborn before the son of the unloved, who is the firstborn. ¹⁷But he shall acknowledge the firstborn, the son of the unloved, by giving him a double portion of all that he has, for he is the beginning of his strength; to him belongs the right of the firstborn” (Deuteronomy 21:15-17).

Though there is nothing to suggest that Abraham loved Hagar and not Sarah, Abraham did begin something of this practice centuries before the Mosaic law was given by God. After Sarah died, Abraham married again. Yet as he reached the end of his days, “⁵Abraham gave all that he had to Isaac; ⁶but to the sons of his concubines, Abraham gave gifts while he was still living, and sent them away from his son Isaac eastward, to the land of the east” (Genesis 25:5-6). It was perhaps because Hagar was a slave, or maybe because Sarah would not allow it, that her son was passed over by Abraham, who only gave them provisions for their journey.

God Reassures

Troubled as Abraham was, God graciously reassured him. God had plans for Ishmael. “¹²God said to Abraham, ‘do not be distressed because of the lad and your maid; whatever Sarah tells you, listen to her, for through Isaac your descendants shall be named. ¹³And of the son of the maid I will make a nation also, because he is your descendant’” (v. 12-13). In so doing, God also reaffirmed His commitment to Isaac and that line of the family.

But here we see that God also confirmed the commitment that He made to Hagar in the desert when she first ran away (Genesis 16:11). Yet it was Isaac who was of the chosen line. Sarah may have been interested in the short-term matter of family inheritance, but God explained to Abraham that countless future generations were His focus. It is wonderful to see how God used the family quarrels of Abraham and Sarah to accomplish His divine purposes. His plans were not to be thwarted by the petty behavior of either Sarah or Ishmael. God was working in all things for good.

This is not to say that God took Sarah's side in the argument, but that His sovereign plan unfolded, as it always does, through the actions of men and women. It was always God's intent to choose Isaac as the 'seed' and not Ishmael. This was the emphasis placed on this narrative by New Testament writers who used the two sons to demonstrate God's election of those whom God has chosen, “⁶for they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel; ⁷nor are they all children because they are Abraham's descendants, but: ‘through Isaac your descendants will be named’” (Romans 9:6-7, see also Hebrews 11:18).

So, ever obedient to the Word of the Lord, “Abraham rose early in the morning and took bread and a skin of water and gave them to Hagar, putting them on her shoulder, and gave her the boy, and sent her away. And she departed and wandered about in the wilderness of Beersheba” (v. 14). That Abraham sent Hagar on her way early need not necessarily imply that he was glad to be rid of her. Perhaps he wanted to part with her privately, before Sarah and other servants had arisen. Or, more prosaically, perhaps he simply wanted Hagar and Ishmael to have the cool of the day on which to begin their journey.

Their parting could not have been easy, on either side. It is difficult to appreciate Abraham’s grief as he sent his child away forever. And Hagar, a slave, had little hopes of a future. Again, no inheritance was given, simply provisions for the journey. As a slave, she had very few possessions. She had no resources. She had been away from her own family for years, and had undoubtedly lost all touch with them. One can only wonder where was Hagar going as she headed off in the morning air. Perhaps she retraced her steps of thirteen years before as she made her way back to Egypt? The fact that she wandered indicates that she had no particular destination in mind.

In fact, the wording used is that used by Abraham to describe his own wandering (Genesis 20:13). It can also be used to describe animals that have strayed (Exodus 23:4) people who have lost their way (Genesis 37:15) or even drunkenness (Job 12:25). Hagar was aimless. She and her son simply knew where they were not wanted, but they had very little understanding of where they eventually make a home. They simply went off into the desert, away from others and searched for a place for themselves.

Despair and Provision

The provisions Abraham gave proved inadequate to the need. Though no time frame is given, eventually “¹⁵when the water in the skin was used up, she left the boy under one of the bushes. ¹⁶Then she went and sat down opposite him, about a bowshot away, for she said, ‘do not let me see the boy die.’ And she sat opposite him, and lifted up her voice and wept” (v. 15-16).

This is a vivid and heartbreaking picture of the ultimate despair for a parent. The Hebrew language used to describe Hagar’s leaving the boy is actually the same as that used to describe the lowering a body into its grave (2 Samuel 18:17, 2 Kings 13:21). To be so helpless when our children are suffering is unendurable.

Such an event was the epitome of pain.

“O daughter of my people, put on sackcloth
And roll in ashes;
Mourn as for an only son,
A lamentation most bitter.
For suddenly the destroyer
Will come upon us” (Jeremiah 6:26).

“Then I will turn your festivals into mourning
And all your songs into lamentation;
And I will bring sackcloth on everyone’s loins
And baldness on every head.
And I will make it like a time of mourning for an only son,
And the end of it will be like a bitter day” (Amos 8:10).

Thankfully, our God is in the habit of hearing those who are in despair.

“The Lord said, “I have surely seen the affliction of My people who are in Egypt, and have given heed to their cry because of their taskmasters, for I am aware of their sufferings” (Exodus 3:7).

“⁷Then we cried to the Lord, the God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction and our toil and our oppression; ⁸and the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm and with great terror and with signs and wonders; ⁹and He has brought us to this place and has given us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey” (Deuteronomy 26:7-9).

“⁸Depart from me, all you who do iniquity,
For the Lord has heard the voice of my weeping.
⁹The Lord has heard my supplication,
The Lord receives my prayer.
¹⁰All my enemies will be ashamed and greatly dismayed;
They shall turn back, they will suddenly be ashamed.” (Psalm 6:8-10).

Hagar prayed. “Do not let me see the boy die” (v. 16) is a prayer. She made no mention of her own thirst, which must have been as great as that of Ishmael. We do not know if she whispered this petition under her breath through parched lips, or cried out aloud tears falling on her cheeks. But it was a prayer nonetheless, perhaps in its purest form as she neither rationalized as did Adam, argued as did Cain, or negotiated as did Abraham.

Hagar prayed, and God answered. “¹⁷God heard the lad crying; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, ‘what is the matter with you, Hagar? Do not fear, for God has heard the voice of the lad where he is. ¹⁸Arise, lift up the lad, and hold him by the hand, for I will make a great nation of him.’ ¹⁹Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water; and she went and filled the skin with water and gave the lad a drink” (v. 17-19).

Hagar had heard the voice of God before, and in circumstances not too different from those in which she now found herself. But here there was no theophany. Scripture does not say that an angel of the Lord appeared to her as He had done previously (Genesis 16:7). Here God spoke from heaven, as He did later to Abraham (Genesis 22:15).

God seemed offended that Hagar did not trust. Perhaps Abraham had not told her that Ishmael would not be forgotten by God. One would think that he would have done so to ease the suffering at their parting,

but Scripture makes no mention of it. Or it could be that the situation was so desperate that Hagar lost all hope despite knowing of the promise of God for her boy.

God's question was rhetorical, of course. God knew full well Hagar's impossible situation. Yet, God reaffirmed His promise to Hagar. In words He used previously when addressing Abraham, God said "do not fear" (v. 17). God was active. God was in control. As God had told Abraham to trust Him and send Hagar away into the desert, so now He told Hagar that He would provide for her and her son. Ishmael would not die. Indeed, God would "make a great nation" of her son. The language was reminiscent of the vow made to Abraham (Genesis 12:2) and later to Jacob (Genesis 46:3). Ishmael was Abraham's son and, though not the child of the promise, the firstborn son of Abraham nonetheless.

God provided. But we must not miss the important fact that while it might seem as if He provided after Hagar had spent time in the desert, in fact God had always provided for Hagar and Ishmael. God works that way. He promises to care for His children, and He never fails to do so. In fact, it seems that when we have plenty we do not rely upon God's provision; instead we choose to rely upon our own resources. Only when those have been exhausted do we look to God. How foolish that is, because it was God Who provided for our abundance in the first place. As Scripture reminds us, all good things come from God. "Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow" (James 1:17). Often we only recognize the source of our provision when we are aware of our own inability to supply our needs.

God provided. The water did not appear suddenly, it had been there all along, but Hagar had not seen it. The issue was that Hagar's despair had blinded her to God's provision. Sometimes we do not look for God to provide because we are only focused on our own circumstances. We are inward looking. We can see the ram provided at the sacrifice of Isaac foreshadowed here (Genesis 22:13) when another son of Abraham seemed at the point of death.

The Other Line of the Family

Hagar and Ishmael were saved. ²⁰God was with the lad, and he grew; and he lived in the wilderness and became an archer. ²¹He lived in the wilderness of Paran, and his mother took a wife for him from the land of Egypt" (v. 20-21). This was the beginnings of the fulfillment of the promise God had made to Ishmael's parents. It was God Who allowed Ishmael to grow up. It was God Who allowed him to prosper.

The particular area in which Ishmael settled, the wilderness of Paran, is in the eastern portion of the Sinai peninsula and was located on the southern boundary of Canaan. The entire area stretched from the Red Sea to Kadesh-Barnea (Deuteronomy 1:1, Numbers 13:26). That his mother took a wife for him was customary, the patriarchs will do the same for their sons. That she took one from Egypt also is sensible, since she had been driven out of Canaan, and her ancestry was Egyptian. And, the location itself made it convenient for him to find an Egyptian wife. Yet it fulfilled the picture of Ishmael as one born of a slave woman, who took a foreign wife, and who lived outside the normal civilized areas.

That Ishmael became proficient in the use of bow and arrow ought not to surprise us. Ishmael lived in the desert and hunting game was necessary to his survival. Also, since Ishmael “settled in defiance of all his relatives” (Genesis 25:18), the weapon would be useful for defense as well.

Unfortunately, this also proved to be the beginnings of some of the future tension for the nation of Israel.

“¹²Now these are the records of the generations of Ishmael, Abraham’s son, whom Hagar the Egyptian, Sarah’s maid, bore to Abraham; ¹³and these are the names of the sons of Ishmael, by their names, in the order of their birth: Nebaioth, the firstborn of Ishmael, and Kedar and Adbeel and Mibsam ¹⁴and Mishma and Dumah and Massa, ¹⁵Hadad and Tema, Jetur, Naphish and Kedemah. ¹⁶These are the sons of Ishmael and these are their names, by their villages, and by their camps; twelve princes according to their tribes. ¹⁷These are the years of the life of Ishmael, one hundred and thirty-seven years; and he breathed his last and died, and was gathered to his people. ¹⁸They settled from Havilah to Shur which is east of Egypt as one goes toward Assyria; he settled in defiance of all his relatives (Genesis 25:12-18).

But we must be careful not to overstate the case. The ‘nations’ that descended from Ishmael are often considered the ancestors of the modern Arabs. There is some truth in that, but we must note that not all Arabs are descended from Ishmael and, as the Table of Nations showed in Genesis 10, there were peoples living in Arabia long before Abraham and his descendants. In fact, the main Old Testament troubles for Israel were mostly between Israel and Egypt (non-Ishmaelites), Israel and Moab/Ammon (descendants of Lot), Israel and Canaan/Philistia (no relation to Abraham), and Israel and Amalek (descendants of Esau). Also, we must consider that even those Arabs which are descended from Ishmael, must include a combination of Christian Muslim, as Islam arose on the area more than two and a half millennia later.

Takeaways

God is gracious and He works in all things to accomplish His purposes. He worked in the dysfunction of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar. He worked in the bad behavior of Ishmael. He worked in the heartbreak of Abraham and Hagar parting. And He worked in the desperation of Hagar and Ishmael struggling in the desert. God worked in all of this, and He works in all things today. Let us praise Him for that, trust His provision, and seek to find ourselves centered in His perfect will for our lives.