

Isaac and Ishmael

Genesis 21:1-21

Sunday February 6th 2011 Morning Service

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1. The Child of Promise: Isaac (1-8)

Promise and Gracious Fulfilment (1-2)

In our daily Christian lives we are dependent upon two key ideas to sustain us, and they are promise and gracious fulfilment. We depend on the promises of God and we look for their gracious fulfilment. To live for God we have to trust his promises and wait for him to graciously fulfil them. Promise and grace are keynote themes in Genesis 21:1-21. Both these words are given to us in the opening verse. For us in our day we are waiting for the Lord to fulfil his promise of returning and creating a new heaven and earth. From the very beginning to the very end of God's dealing with the people of faith in the Scriptures the Lord will keep his promises and act graciously. And in the details of our daily lives we have great and precious promises to depend upon (2 Peter 1:4) and their gracious fulfilments to experience.

A Laughing matter (3-7)

The promised child, Isaac, was given the name 'he laughs' (3) and Sarah in verse 6 says of his birth, 'God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me.' And yet, we saw Sarah laughing earlier in 18:12 when she overheard the Lord promising that she would have a child (18:13-15). At first the laughing is a laughing of unbelief, that God could not possibly give this child. Now it is a laughing of belief and rejoicing that God did do it. This shows two polar opposite attitudes to God's actions: the cynical laughing of unbelief, or the joyous laughing of faith. All of us approach the promises of God with one of these attitudes. Either under our breath we sneer and silently laugh at God's Word, or we laugh in joy at the amazing fulfilled promises of our God.

Obedience (4)

Abraham's response to God's gracious fulfilment of his promise is to act in obedience. In verse 4 we are told that when Isaac was eight days old Abraham circumcised him. Genesis 17:12 tells us God's command to Abraham and the people of promise: 'For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised.' Circumcision was a sign of the promise to bring forth from Abraham a great nation who would be given a great land. It was an obedient response to the promise of blessing. We are to be obedient, joyfully and willingly, from the heart.

Thankfulness (8)

On the day that Isaac was weaned Abraham held a great feast. This was a celebration of thankfulness, joy and laughter for God performing his promise and giving Abraham and Isaac a child in their old age. And from him would come Israel, the Messiah, the kingdom of God, the Church - and a new heaven and a new earth. Of course Abraham did not see all this, only a part of it, but enough to celebrate. What does this teach us? It shows us that we should be thankful when we see God act, and when we see him act that we only see but a part of a great plan. Thankfulness should be one of our keynote emotions.

2. The Child of Disobedience: Ishmael

Doing God's will our way (background: Genesis 16)

Ishmael, though no fault of his own, was the result of Abraham acting in self reliance rather than in faith. He knew God had promised a child but when he did not see Sarah conceive he agreed to Sarah's suggestion and took her maidservant, Hagar. Abraham tried to carry out God's will his way. How easily we can try to do this.

A conflict of interests (10-14)

At the feast of celebration Ishmael mocked. Sarah took the mocking as an attack on the child of promise and a sign of what future events could be like if Ishmael was in her household. She takes decisive action and asks Abraham to remove the boy and his mother. God intervened and tells Abraham to agree. He obeys.

God's faithfulness (14-21)

In the desert of Beersheba Hagar's supplies run out. But as she and the boy sob, the Lord called Hagar from heaven and tells her he has heard the boy's crying and declares that he will make the lad into a great nation. The Lord opens Hagar's eyes and she sees a well. Abraham is obedient in letting the boy go and God is faithful in looking after him. God's faithfulness is linked to our obedience.

Sometimes we simply don't see the obvious (19)

The answer to Hagar's crisis was there all the time; she simply did not see it. The miracle here was not the providing of a supernatural well but opening Hagar's eyes to what was staring her in the face. Her desperation had blinded her. This can be the same with us. We don't see a solution to some great problem we are facing until the Lord takes away what is blocking our sight. The problem is so often with us rather than with our situations. James 1:2-5. What we often need is not so much miraculous intervention, but rather God's wisdom to know what to do. But more than all this, Hagar had forgotten the lesson she had already learnt. Back in chapter 16 we saw that she had been desperate in a desert before, and that the Lord had come to her aid (16:13). More than that, back there God had already promised to make Ishmael into a great nation and so she should realise that he would not let him die now (16:10). How often we can forget God's promises and the encouragements we received in previous years. It is significant that Hagar's eyes were opened once the Lord had spoken. The opening of the eyes came after the hearing of the word. Reading the Bible opens our eyes to God's deliverance.

The Lord's timing is always perfect

All through this narrative is the sense that God's timing is always predetermined and exact. God wanted Sarah and Abraham to wait all those years for a child – for purposes they never knew. God acts to save Ishmael and Hagar at the eleventh hour as Ishmael lay down to die. We must trust the timing of events to God; he knows what he is doing, precisely.

We are not to be passive when the Lord shows us the answer (19b)

When the Lord opened Hagar's eyes and she saw the well of water she drew up some water for the boy.

When God answers our cry for wisdom he rarely expects us to be inactive. Usually, some action on our part is needed.

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