

Chapter 14: The Casting-Out of Abraham

Genesis 21:1–21

Our Enemy works tirelessly to chip away at our confidence in God's faithfulness to keep his promises. Sometimes, Satan tempts us to believe that God's promises are not really worth the wait. Other times, Satan tries to discourage us in the midst of conflict, pain, and strife. If Satan can lead us into despair, he can take our eyes of faith off of God's faithfulness. Still other times, Satan works to sow seeds of dissatisfaction in our hearts. When we are dissatisfied, even God's abundant provision seems meager and unsatisfying. No matter whether our circumstances are good, bad, or indifferent, Satan will use anything in his attempt to hijack our faith away from Christ.

The fact that our Enemy works so hard to confuse us about God's faithfulness should clue us into its great significance. The last thing that Satan wants is for us to live in a constant sense of wonder and awe at the great works God is doing toward the fulfillment of his promises in, around, and through us. When we see God's faithful hand guiding, directing, and protecting us, we learn to walk by faith through situations that seem impossible to endure from a human perspective. Indeed, God is bringing all things together for good to train, shape, and conform us into the image of his Son Jesus Christ (Rom. 8:28–29). Therefore, learning to recognize how God works is critical for our sanctification. In Genesis 21:1–21, we see the multifaceted nature of God's sovereign grace toward us: *God fulfills his promises.*

God Fulfills His Promises for Pleasure (Gen. 21:1–7)

Abraham was seventy-five when he departed from Haran to enter the land of Canaan (Gen. 12:4). After twenty-five years of waiting, Abraham and Sarah see the fulfillment of Yahweh's promises in the birth of their son, Isaac:

[1] The LORD visited Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did to Sarah as he had promised.

[2] And Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age at the time of which God had spoken to him. (Gen. 21:1–2)

In the context of the last few chapters of Genesis, we have seen God *visit* many people: Abraham, in the form of three men (Gen. 18:1–21); Lot, in the form of two angels/men (Gen. 19:1–22); the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, in the raining sulfur and fire of judgment (Gen. 19:23–29); and Abimelech, in a dream of condemnation and warning (Gen. 20:3–7).¹ Although this is the first time that the word “visit” is used, the wider use of the word “visit” in the Bible can describe God's visitation for judgment (e.g., Ex. 20:5; 32:34) or for salvation (Gen. 50:24–25; Ex. 4:31; Ruth 1:6; 1 Sam. 2:21; Jer. 29:10).² In a general sense, the word “describes a divine intervention in someone's life that shapes or alters destiny....In this context the verb *pāqad* signifies a divine intervention to bless

Sarah, an intervention that would change the destiny of the people of God.”³ The Scriptures attribute the births of Samuel to Hannah (1 Sam. 2:21) and of John the Baptist to Elizabeth (Luke 1:68) to God’s *visitation*, since both of those births bring forth prophets who herald the coming of Davidic kings.⁴ Here, God’s visitation brings forth the promised offspring of Abraham, through whom God will fulfill his promises to bless the world (Gen. 21:12).

The Fulfillment of God’s Word

After such a long anticipation, the narration of Isaac’s birth seems abrupt and anticlimactic in order to underscore God’s faithfulness to his word.⁵ Isaac’s birth is a joyous miracle, to be sure (Gen. 21:6–7), but Isaac’s birth is not a surprise. All along, God has repeatedly testified to his intention to give Abraham and Sarah a son. God has now accomplished exactly what he said he would do. Therefore, the text emphasizes the fulfillment of God’s word: “as he had said...as he had promised...of which God had spoken to him” (Gen. 21:1–2).⁶ The final two phrases, translated in the ESV as “as he had promised...of which God had spoken to him,” reflect the same word (“spoken”) in Hebrew. The repetition of this word may reflect the fulfillment of the two times that God explicitly prophesied the birth of Isaac by name (Gen. 17:16–21; 18:10–15).⁷

Even so, while the text attempts to underscore the predicted nature of this birth, the text also points out its miraculous nature by reminding us again of Abraham’s “old age” (Gen. 21:2). Although every birth of a human being in God’s image may be “rightly deemed the effect of divine visitation,” the narrative here reminds us of the way in which this birth to two old, withered people comes about only by the “secret and unwonted power of God, which is superior to the law of nature.”⁸ Beyond the miraculous nature of this birth, the old age of Abraham and Sarah remind us how long they had to wait to receive Isaac as the fulfillment of God’s promises. God made them wait until their bodies were as good as dead, reproductively speaking (Rom. 4:19). God’s greatest miracles come after he has made us wait so long that his promise seems impossible to fulfill.

Obedience to God’s Word

Next, the text tells us of Abraham’s careful obedience to God’s instructions concerning the child of promise:

- [3] Abraham called the name of his son who was born to him, whom Sarah bore him, Isaac.
 [4] And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. (Gen. 21:3–4)

God commanded Abraham to name his son Isaac (Gen. 17:19) and to circumcise his son at eight days old (Gen. 17:12), and Abraham here obeys both of those commands (Gen. 21:3–4).⁹ The text goes out of its way to remind us that Abraham does these things “as God had commanded him” (Gen. 21:4).¹⁰ In the same way, Abraham earlier obeyed God’s command to name his other son Ishmael (Gen. 16:11, 15) and to circumcise Ishmael (Gen. 17:23, 25–26). Abraham’s long wait trained him to learn obedience through his suffering. Although we never know all the reasons behind God’s timing, the Scriptures demonstrate again and again that God teaches us obedience by the suffering of waiting for him to fulfill his word. God’s faithfulness stretches beyond simply keeping any single promise; his faithfulness reaches even into his promises to conform us to the image of his Son (Rom.

8:28–29), who also learned obedience by patiently suffering (cf. Heb. 5:8)

The text also redundantly speaks of Isaac as the “son *who was born to him*, whom Sarah *bore him*” (Gen. 21:3) in order “to drive home the miraculous nature of the birth of a son to Sarah.”¹¹ Nevertheless, we read nothing in this passage to tell us of Abraham’s emotions at the birth of Isaac, even though he must be overwhelmed to meet the child he has awaited for the last twenty-five years.¹² Instead, we only read of Abraham’s care to obey God’s word, even when God’s word requires him to wound his beloved son through circumcision.¹³ Through this and other details in this chapter, we will see glimpses of how Abraham is already preparing himself for the overwhelming task of wounding his beloved son as a sacrifice in the following chapter.

Laughter Over God’s Word

When God announced the coming birth of Isaac, both Abraham and Sarah laughed (Gen. 17:17; 18:12). This laughter prompted God to reaffirm his promise to Abraham (Gen. 17:19–21) and to rebuke Sarah (Gen. 18:13–15). Now, Sarah laughs again, but from an entirely different spirit:

[5] Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. [6] And Sarah said, “God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh over me.” [7] And she said, “Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age.” (Gen. 21:5–7)

The narrator already told us that Isaac is Abraham’s son “in his old age” (Gen. 21:2), but now we read Abraham’s specific age: one hundred years old (Gen. 21:5). Certainly, Abraham’s specific age underscores the miraculous nature of Isaac’s birth yet again, but the genealogies of the Bible often tell us the age “at which a man fathered his first child,” which may suggest that “this was regarded as a most important milestone in his life (cf. 5:3, 6; 11:12, 14, etc.).”¹⁴

Sarah, who is at least ninety years old herself (cf. Gen. 17:17), declares that “God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh over me.” The name of Isaac means “he laughs,” and the original explanation for the name had to do with Abraham and Sarah’s laughter over Isaac’s promised birth. Here, Isaac’s name which was “potentially a reproach (18:15), now conveys only joy.”¹⁵ As Allen Ross writes, “The child’s name would be a reminder of God’s faithfulness rather than of the parents’ unbelief—although the latter would never be totally forgotten in the name.....In contrast with the doubting laughter described in 18:12, Sarah’s laughter here was full of praise and admiration for the Lord—she now was exonerated and could leave the former things behind.”¹⁶ Humanly speaking, no one would have guessed with Abraham that Sarah would nurse children, and yet now Sarah has borne Abraham a son in his old age (Gen. 21:7).

Sarah’s laughter illustrates that God’s promises are worth the wait. At various points, Sarah could not imagine that God would come through to fulfill his promises. When she lost confidence in God’s faithfulness, she gave pursued strategies for fulfilling God’s promises according to her own wisdom (Gen. 16:2), or she slipped into cynical sarcasm at hearing the promises articulated so late in her life (Gen. 18:12). From Sarah’s life, we must learn that God genuinely promises us fullness of joy in him, for at his “right hand are pleasures forevermore” (Ps. 16:11). God often acts more slowly than we would prefer. Nevertheless, as we wait God is accomplishing far more abundantly than we can ask or think (Eph. 3:20).

God Fulfills His Promises Through Pain (Gen. 21:8–14)

At this point in the narrative, Iain Duguid dryly observes, “Not everyone was equally happy about Isaac’s birth, however.”¹⁷ Up to this point, Ishmael was the heir apparent, since no one could believe that Sarah would actually give birth to a son. Even Abraham himself begged God for Ishmael to count as his heir (Gen. 17:18). God’s miracle in the birth of Isaac seriously jeopardizes the standing of Hagar and Ishmael in the household of Abraham. Here is how their fallout takes place:

[8] And the child grew and was weaned. And Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. [9] But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, laughing. [10] So she said to Abraham, “Cast out this slave woman with her son, for the son of this slave woman shall not be heir with my son Isaac.” (Gen. 21:8–10)

Because infant mortality rates were so high in ancient societies, celebrations for reaching the age of two or three (the age of weaning) were common (cf. 1 Sam. 1:22–25).¹⁸ At the party, Sarah sees Ishmael “laughing,” which concerns her enough to demand that Abraham cast out both Hagar and Ishmael, so that Ishmael shall not share Abraham’s inheritance with Isaac. What, then, has Ishmael done, and why do his actions concern Sarah so much?

The Laughter of Ishmael

Almost certainly, Ishmael’s “laughter” is malicious, so that the Apostle Paul paraphrases Ishmael’s actions by the word “persecuted” (Gal. 4:29).¹⁹ Even so, “laughter” has been a tricky concept to define through the last few chapters. To start, both Abraham and Sarah laughed about God’s promise to give Sarah a son, and we do not know the precise reasons why God rebuked only Sarah, but not Abraham (Gen. 17:17–21; 18:12–15). Additionally, Lot’s sons-in-law believed that Lot was “laughing” (Gen. 19:14; ESV: “jesting”) when he warned them to flee the city. Finally, we must factor in the way that Isaac’s very name means “he laughs,” so that one commentator suggests paraphrasing Ishmael’s actions by coining the word, “Isaacking.”²⁰ Allen Ross careful analysis of the biblical usage of the word “laugh” is worth quoting at length:

It was used in 19:14 to describe Lot as he attempted to warn his family—he seemed a mocker or jester; it occurs in 26:8 to describe Isaac’s conjugal playing with Rebekah; it appears in 39:14 and 17 in Potiphar’s wife’s accusation of Joseph as one who trifled, or mocked them. In each case the verb describes an activity that had been misinterpreted: the words of Lot seemed to differ from his previous words, the actions of Isaac showed a different relationship with his “sister,” and in the false accusation Joseph’s alleged rape differs from his good behavior. Also in the “playing” of Ishmael with Isaac, another attitude may have been very visible to Sarah.

We may also note that the verb is used in Exodus 32:6 for the “playing” of the people in the camp when Moses was on the mountain, and in Judges 16:25 when the Philistines brought out the blinded Samson to entertain or play for them. In all the uses there is the idea of a less-than-serious toying with someone, a trifling with someone or something, and possibly a deceptive play that could prove harmful. The use of the word in Genesis 21:9,

then, is more complicated than children’s play. On the surface the activity may have seemed harmless but Ishmael probably did not take the child or the promise seriously. The English word “mock” thus suits the context here, if the mocking is subtle....Ishmael may have been playing with Isaac, but if he was permitted to continue, his real effort would have been to supplant this new heir.²¹

Ishmael’s mockery of Isaac is an attempt to crowd Isaac out of the picture. Therefore, Ishmael is using mockery to set himself against God’s promises, which is a very serious sin.²²

In response, Sarah demands that Abraham cast out Hagar and Ishmael. At first read, Sarah comes off as an overly protective mother. Given the history of bad blood between her and Hagar (cf. Gen. 16:4–6), we may even infer that Sarah is latching onto any justification that will help rid herself of a longstanding source of such pain in her life.²³ Certainly, Sarah speaks from wounding and bitterness, which is clear from the way that she refuses to use the names of Hagar and Ishmael, only calling them “slave woman” (twice) and “the son of the slave woman”; by contrast, Sarah speaks of “my son Isaac” (Gen. 21:10).²⁴ We are right to examine Sarah’s motives with some suspicion.

Nevertheless, God instructs Abraham to do all that Sarah tells him to do (Gen. 21:12), so that we cannot entirely write off Sarah’s concerns as petty personal attacks. Instead, Sarah’s demand uncovers “a fundamental rift which time would disclose and the New Testament expound as the incompatibility of the natural and the spiritual (Ps. 83:5, 6; Gal. 4:29 and context).”²⁵ By insisting that Ishmael “shall not be heir” with Isaac, Sarah seems to be quoting God’s word to Abraham in Genesis 15:4: “This man [Eliezer of Damascus] shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir.”²⁶ Therefore, she demands that Abraham finally rid their family of Hagar and Ishmael, who represent threats to the fulfillment God’s promises concerning Isaac. The word for “cast out” can refer to sending someone into exile, as in the case of Adam and Cain (cf. Gen. 3:24; 4:14), and it will be a key term to describe Pharaoh’s expulsion of Israel out of Egypt (Ex. 6:1; 10:11; 11:1; 12:39): “First a Hebrew would expel an Egyptian from her land. Then an Egyptian monarch would expel Hebrews from his land.”²⁷

Abraham’s Stumbling Block

The narrative recounts Abraham’s response through classic Hebrew understatement:

[11] And the thing was very displeasing to Abraham on account of his son. [12] But God said to Abraham, “Be not displeased because of the boy and because of your slave woman. Whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for through Isaac shall your offspring be named. [13] And I will make a nation of the son of the slave woman also, because he is your offspring.” (Gen. 21:11–13)

Make no mistake—Abraham is furious at Sarah’s demand. Gordon Wenham brings out the dangerous nature of the word “displeased”: “Elsewhere, men explode in anger when they are merely ‘displeased’ (e.g., Num 11:10; 1 Sam 18:8). When God is ‘displeased’ with someone, death often follows (e.g., Gen 38:10; 2 Sam 11:7). Only here is anyone said to be ‘very displeased.’”²⁸

Ishmael, then, has become a stumbling block for Abraham. We have seen Abraham express his attachment to Ishmael through emotionally charged intercession on Ishmael’s behalf (Gen. 17:18),

and now we see Abraham's emotions bursting forward again to protect Ishmael from being cast away. Abraham's response about losing Ishmael is very different from the absence of emotion from Abraham at the birth of Isaac. Of course, fathers should love their children, but Abraham's attachment to Ishmael seems unhealthy. This is not merely about paternal love, but about the promise of God. If push comes to shove, will Abraham allow Isaac to be his sole heir, in fulfillment of God's promises, or will *Abraham* be the one to sabotage God's plan by insisting on giving at least a partial share of the inheritance to Ishmael? John Walton accurately summarizes the threat of Abraham's emotions:

Ishmael is not only a potential obstacle to Isaac, but he continues to be an obstacle to Abraham. Abraham is attached to his son Ishmael. This text details Ishmael's separation just as chapter 13 moved Lot out of the picture. Lot's removal had to do with claims to the land. He was put in place in his own land, distinct from the land promised to Abraham, and with no claims to the land of Abraham. In a similar fashion, Ishmael's claims have to do with family. He is assigned his own family but has no claims within the covenant family of Abraham.²⁹

Just as God used the strife between the herdsmen of Lot's livestock and the herdsmen of Abraham's livestock to initiate Lot's withdrawal from any claim to Canaan (Gen. 13:5–12), so God uses the strife between Sarah and Hagar to withdraw Ishmael from any claim to Isaac's inheritance.

Therefore, God must humble Abraham by commanding that Abraham listen to the voice of his wife, rather than to the affections of his own heart.³⁰ So, God instructs Abraham not to be displeased, but rather to do everything that Sarah says (Gen. 21:12). In Genesis 16:2, Abraham obeyed Sarah's voice sinfully (Gen. 16:2; cf. Gen. 3:17), and then he compounded his sin by permitting Sarah to do to Hagar as she pleased until Sarah's harshness drove Hagar to flee into the wilderness (Gen. 17:6).³¹ This time, God instructs Abraham to do the very things that Abraham had sinned in doing last time: Abraham must listen to Sarah's voice by sending Hagar and Ishmael into the wilderness.

Notably, the narrative limits the source of Abraham's anger as "on account of his son" (Gen. 21:11), without mentioning that Abraham is fighting to keep his second wife, Hagar.³² In both Genesis 16 and Genesis 21, Abraham and Sarah alike treat Hagar as though she were nothing more than breeding stock, without demonstrating any love or affection toward her. While God agrees with Sarah as to the necessity of casting Hagar and Ishmael out, God does not do so out of a lack of affection; rather, God promises to protect Ishmael beyond his exile from Abraham's household.

Our Spiritual Stumbling Block

God clearly explains his rationale for casting out Hagar and Ishmael: "for through Isaac shall your offspring be named" (Gen. 21:12). In other words, "this son alone will bear the family name....Abraham's genealogy will be forever recited through the offspring of Isaac."³³ Adding to this emphasis, we should note that throughout this passage God refers to Ishmael as a *boy* (Gen. 21:12, 17 [twice], 18, 20), but both Abraham and Hagar refer to Ishmael as a *child* (Gen. 21:14, 15, 16): "The latter word denotes a biological relationship. The use of the former word by God minimizes Ishmael's relationship to Abraham as son."³⁴ Indeed, at no point in Genesis 21 do we even read Ishmael's name at all, which further differentiates him from Isaac, whose name appears at several points.³⁵ Ishmael may be the biological son of Abraham, but he is not the son of *promise* that God has

given to Abraham. The distinction between the merely biological children of Abraham and Abraham's spiritual children of promise is key for understanding the New Testament use of this phrase in Romans 9:7. There, the Apostle Paul is contrasting the temporal election of unbelieving Israelites with the spiritual election of all those who believe:

[6] But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, [7] and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but "Through Isaac shall your offspring be named." [8] This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring. (Rom. 9:6–8)

Ishmael is descended from Abraham as a child of the flesh; however, Ishmael does not *belong* to Abraham as a child of promise, to be counted as offspring. In the same way, Paul argues that there are many Israelites who are descended from Abraham, but, because they do not believe in Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of God's promises to Abraham, they do not belong to Abraham as children of promise. Paul does not minimize the value of biological descent from Abraham (cf. Rom. 3:25–29; 9:1–5). Instead, his point is that biological descent on its own is not sufficient.

This is why Abraham cannot keep Ishmael in his household. In Galatians 4, Paul interprets the spiritual stakes in this situation:

[21] Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law? [22] For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and one by a free woman. [23] But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born through promise. [24] Now this may be interpreted allegorically: these women are two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar. [25] Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. [26] But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother. [27] For it is written,

"Rejoice, O barren one who does not bear;
break forth and cry aloud, you who are not in labor!
For the children of the desolate one will be more
than those of the one who has a husband."

[28] Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise. [29] But just as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so also it is now. [30] But what does the Scripture say? "Cast out the slave woman and her son, for the son of the slave woman shall not inherit with the son of the free woman." [31] So, brothers, we are not children of the slave but of the free woman. (Gal. 4:21–31)

The gospel reveals that God plans to accomplish all of his will by his own promise, and not according to the will of human flesh. Furthermore, anyone who is "born according to the flesh" will

persecute those who are “born according to the Spirit”: “so also it is now” (Gal. 4:29). Therefore, just as Abraham had to cast out Hagar and Ishmael, so we must also cast out the desires of the flesh: both the fleshly determination to merit salvation by keeping the law in our own strength, and also the fleshly desire to reject God’s law altogether.³⁶ We cannot depend in part on the promises of God while also attempting to justify ourselves by the law. This does not mean that we avoid seeking, by the grace of the Holy Spirit, to obey God in what he instructs us to do. Instead, it means that we abandon all justifications for ourselves on the basis of our own righteousness, and we instead live by repentance from our sin and faith in the gospel. The gospel of Christ’s righteousness that we receive through faith is our confidence, not the righteousness that we have achieved on our own.

Provision for Ishmael

And yet, God also promises that he will protect and provide for Ishmael, making him into a nation, “because he is your offspring” (Gen. 21:13). It is not that God has no compassion for Hagar and Ishmael, but only that God insists on protecting Isaac, the child of promise. In fact, “Once again at the end of his life Abraham sent away all his other sons in order to preserve the inheritance for Isaac (25:6).”³⁷ God both promises to provide for Ishmael *and* to clear away any hurdle or threat to establishing Isaac as the promised offspring for Abraham.

Therefore, Abraham arises early the next morning to do what must be done: “So Abraham rose early in the morning and took bread and a skin of water and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed and wandered in the wilderness of Beersheba” (Gen. 21:14).³⁸ If we are reading this text closely, we know how painful this moment must be for Abraham as he sends away his son, a dynamic that prepares us for the next chapter: “If he cannot contemplate sending Ishmael away, how much harder will he find the command in 22:2?”³⁹ Nevertheless, Abraham’s obedience here also prepares him to do what must be done when God asks him to sacrifice Isaac.⁴⁰ Today, Abraham must protect God’s promises by sending away one son; tomorrow, Abraham must entrust himself to God’s promises by sacrificing another son. Once again, Genesis 21 prepares us for the shock of Genesis 22.

The phrase “and sent her away” (Gen. 21:14) is a word that reflects a softer action than the “casting out” that Sarah demanded (Gen. 21:10), although “to send away” one’s wife usually describes divorce (e.g., Deut 22:19; 24:1, 3).⁴¹ Even so, the words for “cast out” and “send away” are often used together, so that Abraham is doing what Sarah told him to do, albeit a bit more gently than Sarah intended.⁴² Along these lines, Abraham kindly sends Hagar and Ishmael off with as many basic provisions of bread and of water as they could carry.⁴³ As we will see, though, these provisions are not nearly enough for their needs through the wilderness on the route that Hagar chooses.

God Fulfills His Promises by Provision (Gen. 21:15–21)

Too soon, Abraham’s provisions run out, leaving Hagar and Ishmael on the brink of death from thirst:

[15] When the water in the skin was gone, she put the child under one of the bushes. [16] Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot, for she said, “Let me not look on the death of the child.” And as she sat opposite him, she

lifted up her voice and wept. (Gen. 21:15–16)

The word for how Hagar “put” Ishmael under a bush “almost always refer to lowering a dead body into its grave (2 Sam. 18:17; 2 K. 13:21; Jer. 4:19), or the lowering of a person into what will presumably be his grave (Gen. 37:24; Jer. 38:6).”⁴⁴ The word for the “bush” under which Hagar deposits the half-dead body of her son is only used elsewhere in Genesis to describe the kind of “bush” that did not arise before the Fall (cf. Gen. 2:5), a detail which perhaps makes the scene more ominous. Overall, this is a heart-wrenching scene: “Suffering the trauma of divorce, [Hagar] wanders dazed in the wilderness until their water runs out, and then she dumps her son under a bush sufficiently distant so that she can see him but not so close as to hear his agonized cries as he dies of thirst.”⁴⁵ As Hagar weeps, she offers what may be the first recorded prayer of someone in distress: “Let me not look on the death of the child” (Gen. 21:16).⁴⁶

God Hears Ishmael

At this point, God hears the voice of Ishmael and responds:

[17] And God heard the voice of the boy, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, “What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. [18] Up! Lift up the boy, and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make him into a great nation.” [19] Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water. And she went and filled the skin with water and gave the boy a drink. (Gen. 21:17–19)

Since Hagar is the one who has been weeping why do we read that God hears the voice of Ishmael?⁴⁷ At this point, we should recall the fact that the name *Ishmael* means “God hears.” So, it is almost as though the text reads, “And God heard *God-hears*...”⁴⁸ Previously, God heard Hagar’s affliction (Gen. 16:11) and Abraham’s intercession on behalf of Ishmael (Gen. 17:20), but now God hears Ishmael himself.⁴⁹

Although the text tells us that God hears Ishmael, the angel of God speaks from heaven to Hagar. First, the angel of God “introduces himself with a question that need not be asked by one with supernatural knowledge.”⁵⁰ This voice from heaven knows Hagar by name, and certainly knows what troubles her as she weeps. The point of the question is not to seek information, but to direct Hagar’s attention to God’s power to provide for her and her son. Therefore, the message continues, assuring Hagar that God has heard the voice of the boy. On this basis, the voice urges Hagar to lift up her boy, holding him fast with her hand, since “I” will make him a great nation (Gen. 21:18). By the word “I,” the text clarifies that “the angel of God” is indeed God himself. Then, God opens Hagar’s eyes to see a well of water, from which Hagar fills her waterskin to give Ishmael something to drink.

In this way, God provides for Ishmael’s future *and* his present—“a destiny and a drink.”⁵¹ Or, to put it another way, “Not only does God make promises; he makes provision.”⁵² In the midst of the deep needs of both Hagar and Ishmael, God provides far more abundantly than they can think or imagine—not only for water (the immediate need), but for Ishmael’s long-term establishment as a nation.⁵³ We should also recognize the way that this episode foreshadows Israel’s own experience in the wilderness. After being sent out of Egypt, they too will face deep needs for water (Ex. 15:22–27;

17:1–7; Num. 20:2–13): “God would honor his Word to Israel and preserve them for their destiny, just as he honored his Word to Ishmael (16:10–12; 21:18) and preserved him through the wilderness experience.”⁵⁴ Just as God uses our waiting, so God also uses what we lack to teach us to trust him.

God Establishes Ishmael

This chapter of Ishmael’s story ends with by summarizing Ishmael’s life into adulthood:

[20] And God was with the boy, and he grew up. He lived in the wilderness and became an expert with the bow. [21] He lived in the wilderness of Paran, and his mother took a wife for him from the land of Egypt. (Gen. 21:20–21)

We will read a further account of Ishmael’s future, including his children, in Genesis 25:12–18. For now, we should note that this final summary in the passage follows closely God’s promises about Ishmael to Hagar in Genesis 16:12: “He shall be a wild donkey of a man, his hand against everyone and everyone’s hand against him, and he shall dwell over against all his kinsmen.” Accordingly, Ishmael lives in the wilderness, fending for himself (and, perhaps, defending himself) with his expert bow skills.⁵⁵ In the sense that Ishmael learns to survive in the harshness of the wilderness, we read that “God was with the boy” (Gen. 21:20). This does not mean that God is with Ishmael in the same, spiritual way that God is with Isaac, since Ishmael’s Egyptian wife foreshadows “the future dissension between the Israelites and the Ishmaelites.”⁵⁶

Instead, this narrative closes by accounting for how God fulfills *all* his promises. God has given Isaac to Abraham and Sarah, and God has expelled Ishmael from impinging on the inheritance reserved for Isaac. Still, God has also protected and provided for Ishmael in order to establish him as a nation, just as God promised (Gen. 16:10; 17:20; 21:13). From beginning to end, God has faithfully kept *all* his word.

Discussion Questions

1. How does Genesis 21:1–7 repeatedly emphasize God’s faithfulness to his promises? Why is God’s faithfulness in the birth of Isaac so important? What does the laughing joy of Sarah tell us about the goodness of God’s promises? Which of God’s promises are you tempted to believe either that (1) they will not come to pass, or (2) they will not ultimately be worth it?
2. How do we tend to understand the relationship between conflict and the fulfillment of God’s promises? How does God use conflict, pain, and strife toward the fulfillment of his promises here in Genesis 21? What does God promise in his word to you? How does God use conflict, pain, and strife toward the fulfillment of those promises? How, then, should we deal with conflict?
3. According to Paul, how does the birth of Isaac represent the gospel of promise? How does the presence of Ishmael represent slavery to the law? How does Ishmael’s presence threaten the gospel? When Abraham painfully casts out Hagar and Ishmael, what do we learn about protecting the purity of the gospel? What do you need to cast out to live by God’s promises?

4. Why does God say that he comes to the rescue of Ishmael in the wilderness (Gen. 21:17)? How does God provide for Hagar and Ishmael? How has God demonstrated his faithfulness by providing for your needs in the past? Where are you tempted to doubt God's provision for your needs today? Why is it so hard to trust God to "give us this day our daily bread" (Matt. 6:11)?

Notes

1. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 72. Hamilton only lists the Lord's visitations to Abraham and to Lot, but, as the next sentence in my exposition demonstrates, God's *visits* for the purposes of judgment and of salvation.

2. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 80.

3. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 378.

4. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 72.

5. "One can hardly fail to ask why the writer has delayed and treated so anticlimactically the news of Isaac's birth. Certainly more attention was paid to the announcement of the birth of the son in chapter 18 than here in the report of the birth itself. If we look for an answer to this question in the clues that come out of the text, we may find it in the emphasis given in the narrative to the Lord's faithfulness to his word. The birth of Isaac came about 'as the LORD had said,' a fact stressed three times within the first two verses. The plan not only came about, but more importantly, it happened as it was announced. Thus the narrative focuses our attention on God's faithfulness to his word and to his careful attention to the details of his plan." (Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 176.)

6. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 376.

7. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 79.

8. Calvin, *Genesis*, 537. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.xxvii.i.html>>

9. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 80.

10. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 376.

11. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 80.

12. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 74.

13. "Abraham pursued his uniform tenor of obedience, in not sparing his own son. For, although it would be painful for him to wound the tender body of the infant; yet, setting aside all human affection, he obeys the word of God." (Calvin, *Genesis*, 538–39. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.xxvii.i.html>>)

14. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 80.

15. Kidner, *Genesis*, 150.

16. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 378–79.

17. Duguid, *Living in the Gap Between Promise and Reality*, 122.

18. "Breast-feeding in tradition societies often continues much longer than in the West, so that a child may not be weaned until he is three (2 Macc 7:27). The importance of this occasion was marked by a great feast to celebrate it (cf. 1 Sam 1:22–25; see further TDOT 1:26–27). In a society where infant mortality was high, to reach the age of two or three would be regarded as a significant achievement, so this in part explains the magnitude of the celebrations. From now on Isaac looks relatively certain to be Abraham's heir." (Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 81.)

19. Kidner, *Genesis*, 151.

20. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 87.

21. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 379–80.

22. “We tend to ignore mockery of God. We see it so constantly all around us that it is hard to do anything else. Yet the Bible always treats mocking as a serious sin. For instance, in Psalm 1:1 the mocker is listed along with the wicked and the sinner as those with whom the wise man does not keep company. Indeed, in the book of Proverbs, the mocker is the opposite of the wise man (Prov. 9:8, 12). The third commandment, ‘You shall not take the name of the Lord in vain,’ warns us against treating God and his attributes lightly.” (Duguid, *Living in the Gap Between Promise and Reality*, 122.)

23. Calvin, *Genesis*, 541. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.xxvii.i.html>>

24. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 82.

25. Kidner, *Genesis*, 150–51.

26. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 83.

27. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 79–80.

28. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 83.

29. Walton, *Genesis*, 500.

30. “It may truly seem absurd, that the servant of God should thus be carried away by a blind impulse: but God thus deprives him of judgment, not only to humble him, but also to testify to all ages, that the dispensing of his grace depends upon his own will alone.” (Calvin, *Genesis*, 544. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.xxvii.i.html>>)

31. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 83.

32. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 80.

33. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 270.

34. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 81.

35. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 81.

36. For a detailed exposition arguing that *antinomianism* and *legalism* are not two opposite reactions to the law, but rather as the fruit of the *same* error, see Sinclair Ferguson, *The Whole Christ: Legalism, Antinomianism, and Gospel Assurance—Why the Marrow Controversy Still Matters* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 155–75.

37. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 381.

38. “With the early start compare 22:3; it seems safe to infer a habit of facing a hard task resolutely.” (Kidner, *Genesis*, 151.)

39. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 83.

40. “The words *In Isaac shall thy seed be called* (AV, RV) put God’s choice beyond all doubt, bringing into the open both the fact of election, as Paul shows in Romans 9:7–9, and, for Abraham, the irreplaceability of Isaac. On this anvil there was no escape from the hammer-blow of the next chapter, and Hebrews 11:18, 19 shows that Abraham’s faith was brought to perfection by this very means.” (Kidner, *Genesis*, 151.)

41. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 84.

42. “Sarah had insisted that Hagar be banished (*qāraš*), but Abraham is not that harsh. He does not expel Hagar; he sent her off (*šālah*, in the Piel). At times *qāraš* is paired with *šālah* (Piel) suggesting an overlap in meaning between the two. Yahweh ‘sent forth’ (*šālah*, Piel) sinning man from the garden (3:23), and ‘drove him out’ (*qāraš*, 3:24). Yahweh informs Moses that Pharaoh will send out (*šālah*, Piel) Israel from Egypt, and that he will drive (*qāraš*) them out of his land (Exod. 6:1). The same two verbs occur in the same sequence when Pharaoh dismisses and expels Israel from his territory (Exod. 11:1). There is, however, a basic difference between *qāraš* and *šālah* (Piel). ‘Whereas the latter often refers to a friendly release, the former is invariably a hostile act.’ Similarly, the English verbs ‘send off, dismiss’ do not carry the harsh nuances of ‘expel, drive out.’” (Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 82–83. Citing: D. Daube, *The Exodus Pattern in the Bible* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), 30.)

43. Kidner, *Genesis*, 151.

44. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 83.

45. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 88.

46. “In a sense Hagar utters one of the first prayers in the Bible: *Do not let me see the child die*. We have seen others speak to God with rationalizations (Adam), protestations (Cain), and interrogations (Abraham). The Hebrew form that is used...is the cohortative, one use of which is to express a wish—more often a positive rather than a negative one. Where it is negative the speaker is in some kind of distress.” (Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 83.)

47. Calvin, *Genesis*, 549. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.xxvii.i.html>>

48. Kidner, *Genesis*, 152.

49. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 322.

50. “In 16:8, he asked, ‘Hagar where have you come from?’ In 18:9, he inquired, ‘Where is Sarah your wife?’ and here, ‘What is the matter, Hagar?’ In each case, the angel discloses his supernatural identity by mentioning a name that a human stranger would not know. Having thus disclosed indirectly who he is, the angel then gives the apposite message.” (Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 85–86.)

51. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 84.

52. “A well that had been there all the time Hagar now notices for the first time. For similar miraculous eye-openings, see 2 Kgs 6:17, 20, though the closest parallel is in Gen 22:13, where Abraham raises his eyes and sees a ram caught in a thicket.” (Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 86.)

53. “The episode tellingly portrays man’s plight and God’s grace: on the one hand, diminishing supplies, scant refuge and final despair; on the other, the abundance of the well (once it was revealed), the promise of life and posterity, and (2) the presence of God.” (Kidner, *Genesis*, 152.)

54. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 381–82.

55. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 274.

56. Calvin, *Genesis*, 551. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.xxvii.i.html>>