

Then Jesus answered and said to them... "You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life;

“And These Are They Which Testify of Me”

Sermons on Genesis

Genesis 20,21

Isaac—A Child of Promise

With Study Questions

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Preview

In chapters twenty and twenty-one of Genesis we read of the following: once again Abraham will deceive a king regarding the nature of his relationship with Sarah. Isaac, the son of promise, is born. Ishmael, the son of the flesh, will scoff at Isaac and is subsequently cast out into the wilderness with his mother, Hagar. Ishmael comes near death but is spared by the Lord. We will then read of promises and covenants made between Abraham and the King Abimelech.

Once again, there are no major points of difficulty so we shall promptly proceed to the points of emphasis.

I. Points of Emphasis

You're a Dead Man

It's hard to decide what is more astonishing—the fact that Abraham, after having been rebuked by the Pharaoh of Egypt twenty-five years earlier, commits the same offense with another king, or that, at ninety, Sarah is still so overwhelmingly attractive that the king can't keep his hands off of her.

Once again Abraham lies, this time to Abimelech about Sarah being his sister. This results in quite a confrontation between God and Abimelech. God comes to him in a dream with the imposing words, **“Indeed you are a dead man because of the woman whom you have taken, for she is a man's wife” (Genesis 20:3)**. Abimelech defends himself on what appears to be solid ground. “They lied to me, I didn't know!” Great damage falls upon the pagan when the people of God fail to be faithful.

When Christians Lie

When Christians, as individuals or a collective group, lie to their neighbors or to the government, as we have seen in recent years, it has many adverse effects. It brings shame upon the church, it robs glory from God, but it also creates a situation where the pagan remains, or goes further, into darkness and judgment. Abraham, instead of being an intercessor and a blessing to Abimelech, tempts Abimelech to sin.

Years ago I had a brush with a man, of a somewhat criminal element, who, when he found I was a minister, all but physically attacked me. He also hurled epithets and abuse toward the name of God. When I pressed to find out why he was so angry, the conversation turned to a mutual acquaintance, a professed Christian, who still owed him money from a drug deal.

Withheld From Sinning

But Abraham's poor behavior did not justify Abimelech. When Abimelech argued his own innocence, God discloses a remarkable revelation—**“Yes, I know that you did this in the integrity of your heart. For I also withheld you from sinning against Me; therefore I did not let you touch her” (Genesis 20:6).** What is happening here? God seems to acknowledge that Abimelech did act according to the integrity of his heart, but then takes credit for the moral victory Himself.

Primary and Secondary

Herein lies one of the great biblical principles that so many who name the name of Christ simply reject. We might call it primary and secondary causes or confluence or mystery or incomprehensible, but we most certainly must call it biblical. In short, men, even unregenerate men, do not operate independent of the sovereign will of God. We are not autonomous beings. Arthur Pink states it well.

All this modern talk about man's “freedom” and man's going his own way in defiance of God's secret counsels leaves God out entirely. To say that God wants to influence men but that men will not let Him is to reduce the Almighty to a helpless spectator, full of gracious intentions but lacking in power to make them good. But what saith the Scriptures? Hear them: “The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord, as the rivers of water: He turneth it whithersoever He will” (Proverbs 21:1).

So much for the false analogy of God being a “gentleman” who will not force His way into your life. He graciously and irresistibly subdues our rebellious heart. Praise the Lord!

Abimelech's Repentance

After revealing to Abimelech why he succeeded in not touching Sarah, God calls Abimelech to restore Sarah to Abraham accompanied by a great caution of judgment if the request is ignored—God had closed the wombs of the house of Abimelech (verse 18) which meant that in due time his entire nation would disappear. Abimelech will restore Sarah, and give Abraham many gifts, but not before he gave both Abraham and Sarah an earful.

Abraham's Achilles' Heel

In verses nine and ten Abimelech would confront Abraham as to why he would do this. In verse 16 Abimelech said to Sarah, “**Behold I have given your brother** (I wonder what kind of emphasis he put on this word) **a thousand pieces of silver; indeed this vindicates you before all who are with you and before everybody.’ Thus she was rebuked**” (parenthesis mine).

Sarah offers no excuse for her behavior. Abraham offers a miserable one. He was afraid. Two things here: first, we all have our Achilles' heel. Abraham wandered in a hostile wilderness and initiated a heroic rescue of his nephew Lot over a powerful king (Genesis 14). He was courageous in his dealings with the king of Sodom and in many ways is exemplary in his courage and faith. But for some reason he just couldn't handle the idea that someone might kill him in order to take his wife—so he perpetuates this half-truth about Sarah being his sister and suppresses the further evidence of her being his wife.

Similar to Peter

How reminiscent of Peter who, in his attempt to save Jesus, was bold enough to cut off a man's ear before an entire detachment of Roman troops, but when a slave-girl recognized him as one of Jesus' disciples, was so afraid that he denied even knowing Jesus (John 18).

I find that I am not generally afraid of tight places, bad neighborhoods, stray dogs, confrontations or speaking in public. But recently I was asked to speak at a men's conference and was offered a flight in a man's private plane. My palms were sweating as I declined the invitation. Commercial flights are hard enough for me.

An Expected Struggle

We all have demons¹ we must fight until the day we die. We ought not think that the new life we have in Christ means we no longer struggle with the flesh. In fact it is just the opposite. It is this new life which engages with the old man, and the struggle becomes all the more apparent.

Second-Rate Christians

Verse thirteen is very tell-tale. Abraham's standing request of Sarah was that, “**everywhere, wherever we go, say of me, 'He is my brother.'**” For twenty-five years Abraham courted this particular sin. It would have its consequences. But we should not think ourselves second-rate or second-class because of our struggles with sin. If our successes were how we were rated

¹ I use the term 'demon' metaphorically here of our own flesh, although I do not deny their actual metaphysical existence.

before God, second-rate would be a compliment. If the success of Jesus is how we are rated before God, second-rate would be blasphemy.

No Throwing in the Towel

Abraham didn't allow this one sin to so blow him out of the water that he viewed his Christian life as a dismal failure. He did not throw in the towel and completely turn himself over to a reprobate lifestyle because of his failure in this particular area. Nor should we think that because we struggle in a certain area—one we might call an addiction or compulsion—that our Christian life is of no avail. In some respects the Christian life is called a walk. In other respects it's a fight. We all must fight the fight.

Birth of Isaac, Casting Out Ishmael

In chapter twenty-one we read of the birth of Isaac. When Isaac is weaned they have a feast where Ishmael (who is probably about 17) taunts his younger half-brother. Sarah observes this and says to Abraham that he should cast both Hagar and Ishmael into the wilderness. This breaks Abraham's heart for he is quite attached to Ishmael.

God tells Abraham to listen to Sarah, reaffirming that it will be Isaac, not Ishmael, who will be the child of promise. Although a great nation will also come from Ishmael. Abraham gives Hagar and Ishmael bread and water and sends them into the wilderness. Very little emphasis is generally given to this event. But almost as sure as plunging a dagger into the chest of Isaac would have killed him, sending Ishmael into the wilderness of Beersheeba was a death sentence.

Soon the water is used up and Hagar prepares herself for the death of her son, who she places under a shrub. God hears the voice of Ishmael and leads Hagar to a well. Ishmael grows, becomes an archer and takes an Egyptian wife—his mother's people.

Abraham and Abimelech

In the remainder of chapter twenty-one we read of Abimelech approaching Abraham and essentially asking for his blessing, which he receives. Shortly thereafter, however, Abraham rebukes Abimelech for the way Abimelech's servants seize a well of water. Abimelech denies knowledge of this event, after which a covenant is made between the two involving seven ewe lambs.

One might question why Abraham would covenant with Abimelech, yet would have nothing to do with the king of Sodom. It was Abimelech's desire to live in peace. When Christians are approached by pagans with an offer of peace, assuming no extenuating circumstance, the offer should be accepted.

II. Primary Emphasis

Jesus said, **“You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me” (John 5:39).** So how do the stories of Ishmael and Isaac testify of Jesus? Galatians gives a commentary on this Old Testament story.

I’m Having Doubts

My little children, for whom I labor in birth again until Christ is formed in you, ²⁰ I would like to be present with you now and to change my tone; for I have doubts about you (Galatians 4:19,20).

These Christians were tempted to go back to Jewish practices. Many of which were falsely asserted to be a means by which people were actually saved. It was Paul’s desire to form Christ in them. But having Christ formed in us does not mean we begin to trust in our behavior as means of salvation. Such thinking caused Paul to have doubts about them. Sadly, similar doubts should be had about much of modern evangelicalism. Paul now uses the examples of Ishmael and Isaac.

Ishmael and Law, Isaac and Christ

Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not hear the law? ²² For it is written that Abraham had two sons: the one by a bondwoman, the other by a freewoman. ²³ But he *who was* of the bondwoman was born according to the flesh, and he of the freewoman through promise, ²⁴ which things are symbolic (Galatians 4:21-24).

We will now learn, by the symbolism of the two sons, what it means to be under the law versus under grace. The son by the bondwoman (Ishmael) was according to the flesh. It was the plans, efforts, results and subsequent consequences of the flesh. It was men’s endeavor.

The son of the freewoman (Isaac) was according to God’s promise. Similar to Christ, Isaac was the promised seed of God. Similar to Christ, God gave his name prior to his birth. Similar to Christ, God prophesied his birth to be at a set time. Similar to Christ, Isaac was born through supernatural means. So far from being the efforts of men, it had to vanquish the meddling affairs of men.

Jerusalem Versus Jerusalem

For these are the two covenants: the one from Mount Sinai which gives birth to bondage, which is Hagar—²⁵ for this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia, and corresponds to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children—²⁶ but the Jerusalem above is free, which is the mother of us all (Galatians 4:24-26).

Paul compares Hagar to bondage and law, that is, salvation by works. It was the Jerusalem of the flesh, ethnic Jews who denied Christ. Jews, as Jesus said, who are not Jews (Revelation 2:9; 3:9). The true Jews, if you will, are citizens of the Jerusalem above. This Jerusalem is free from the law of sin and death. It is the mother of all true members of God's family.

For it is written: “Rejoice, O barren, *You* who do not bear! Break forth and shout, *You* who are not in labor! For the desolate has many more children Than she who has a husband” (Galatians 4:27).

By men's estimation, this child should not exist. It was impossible for him to even be born. But she has reason to rejoice more than the natural father and mother for her children are beyond number.

Christians—Children of Promise

Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are children of promise.²⁹ But, as he who was born according to the flesh then persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, even so *it is now* (Galatians 4:28,29).

Isaac was not merely a shadow of the miraculous birth of Christ, he was a shadow of our miraculous births as well. If we believe, then we are children of promise. In the same way God appointed a day of birth, death, and destiny for Isaac, so He has for us. Our inclusion in His salvation is initiated and secured by Him. Like a river, He has turned our hearts toward Himself.

Persecution

Paul is telling his readers to expect something. In the same way Ishmael (the child of the flesh and works) taunted Isaac (the child of promise), those of the flesh will persecute those of the Spirit. The direct application of this was Jews persecuting Christians. But it should be expected that those under law will persecute those under grace.

No Bondwomen Allowed

Nevertheless what does the Scripture say? “Cast out the bondwoman and her son, for the son of the bondwoman shall not be heir with the son of the freewoman.” ³¹ So then, brethren, we are not children of the bondwoman but of the free (Galatians 4:30,31).

Abraham, as hard as it was, cast Ishmael and Hagar into the wilderness. There was to be no confusion within the covenant people of God. For the natural man to think he has anything to offer God on his own behalf is a sign that he is excluded from God’s promise. The church is not to tolerate any hint of the bondwoman in her midst. There should be no confusion regarding salvation by works and salvation by grace—no confusion between justification and sanctification.

The Work of Faith

The most insidious trap may be those who look at their own faith as a meritorious contribution to their own salvation and fail to view faith itself as a gift of God. Faith is the greatest work. It is implicitly required in the first commandment and the absence of it is a sign of an evil heart (Hebrews 3:12).

An Easy Yoke

The good news of the gospel is that we are not children of the bondwoman but of the free. Jesus comforts His bride in Matthew 11:

“Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰For My yoke is easy and My burden is light” (Matthew 11:28-30).

Rest for our souls is not found in our ability to keep a law, any law. It is found when we know, or rather (as Paul instructs in Galatians 4:9) are known by God. Jesus’ yoke isn’t easy because He is a stronger bull than we and therefore more help than the average bull. It’s not as if we’re next to Him, plowing the field together. His yoke is easy and burden is light for us, not for Him. The burden is light for us because He carried it all. It’s when that sinks in, that our souls will begin to take joy in the rest that the Bible says we already have.

Questions for Study

1. How can the poor behavior of Christians negatively affect unbelievers (page 2)?
2. Explain how Abimelech didn't sin in his dealings with Sarah (page 3).
3. What was Abraham's Achilles' heel (page 4)?
4. Should Christians expect not to struggle with sin (page 4)?
5. How do you know you're not a second-rate Christian (pages 4,5)?
6. Are you ever tempted to throw in the towel? What tempts you to do this and how should you react (page 5)?
7. What doubts did the Apostle Paul have about the Galatian Christians (page 6)?
8. What do Isaac and Ishmael symbolize (page 6)?
9. What is the difference between the Jerusalem which is now and the one which is above (page 7)?
10. How are we children of promise (page 7)?
11. What should Christians expect from those under the law (pages 7,8)?
12. Why was the bondwoman cast out? How does this apply to today's church (page 8)?
13. How can faith itself be involved in works righteousness (page 8)?
14. Discuss Jesus' words, "My yoke is easy and My burden is light" (page 8).