

Isaac or Ishmael

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Study Given by W.D. Frazee—July 27,

The apostle Paul tells us that what things were written before time were written for our learning. So the New Testament draws heavily on both the precepts and narratives of the Old Testament in bringing us the Gospel message. Our Scripture this morning is an example of this:

“For it is written, that Abraham had two sons, the one by a bondmaid, the other by a freewoman. But he who was of the bondwoman was born after the flesh; but he of the freewoman was by promise. Which things are an allegory: for these are the two covenants; the one from the mount Sinai, which gendereth to bondage, which is Agar. For this Agar is Mount Sinai in Arabia, and answereth to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children. But Jerusalem which is above is free, which is the mother of us all. For it is written, Rejoice, thou barren that bearest not; break forth and cry, thou that travailest not: for the desolate hath many more children than she which hath an husband. Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are the children of promise. But as then he that was born after the flesh persecuted him that was born after the Spirit, even so it is now. Nevertheless what saith the scripture? Cast out the bondwoman and her son: for the son of the bondwoman shall not be heir with the son of the freewoman. So then, brethren, we are not children of the bondwoman, but of the free. Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage” Galatians 4:22-5:1.

In this Scripture Paul tells us that what happened back there in the days of Abraham is an allegory, a parable. We may learn some lessons from it. He draws some parallels. He compares Agar and Ishmael to certain spiritual experiences. He compares Isaac on the other hand in contrast. He says that we, like Isaac, are the children of promise.

Let’s see as we review the history if God will bless us in learning some precious lessons applicable to our present experience.

God selected Abraham when he was over in Ur of the Chaldees, and told him that he was to leave where he was and come to a land where he would be shown. He advanced as far as Haran, and there at his father’s death he moved on to the land of Canaan at the age of 75. God gave him a promise that he would have seed

as numberless as the stars, like the sands on the sea shore. It is written that Abraham believed God.

At the age of 75 Abraham had no children. Sarah was barren. So the years went on. More than once God appeared to him and renewed the promise, and Abraham kept believing.

But as time went on there was no heir, and the day came when Sarah came to him and said, Abraham, 10 years ago God promised us a son. We have been hoping and expecting all this time. Nothing has happened. It may be that there is something that God is looking to us to do to cooperate with Him. It may be that there is something we need to do to help carry out His will, and thus fulfill His promise. So I suggest that my maid carry on the physiological function of childbearing, and that we have a son by her.

That whole thing doubtless looks to us as repulsive. I hope it does. And we wonder how anyone could think of such a thing. But one of the first lessons that God would impress on our hearts this morning is that in the suggestion Sarah was very much in keeping with the customs of her time. She was doing exactly what many other wives had done and were doing. When a woman could not bear children it was an accepted practice for her to give her maid to her husband that the maid might do the part of the wife's duty which she was unable to carry on.

So Sarah was merely in the customs of the time. Abraham and Sarah talked it over. They may have prayed about it. At any rate, Sarah's suggestion was accepted, and soon Hagar, Sarah's maid, presented Abraham with a son, and all the camp rejoiced. Abraham rejoiced. At last an heir had been born.

It was not only in harmony with the customs of the time, it was scientific. By that I mean that it was obvious Sarah was past the time when a child could be expected. And even in her fertile years she was barren. But here was a girl who could supply the place that Sarah could not fill. And it worked. What Sarah had been unable to do, Hagar did. So at last the child was born.

Keep in mind three things: First, what was done was done in harmony with the spirit and custom of the times. Second, it was scientific. And third, it worked. It got results. And anyone knows that is the main thing.

Or is it?

Time went on. Ishmael grew from infancy to childhood and entered his teens. Then a revelation came to Abraham. This is 13 years after the birth of Ishmael. And during all those 13 years the whole camp thought that Ishmael was the heir promised of God. Abraham thought so, and Ishmael thought so as he grew into years of understanding. God's promise had been fulfilled. Abraham had a son. This was the heir promised from Heaven.

But finally when Abraham is 99 years old the Lord appeared to him and said in effect, Do you remember that promise I made to you when you were 75 years old that you were to have a son?

Yes Lord, I remember that. I am so glad it has been granted.

No. That promise has never been fulfilled yet.

Oh, yes. Here is Ishmael.

No. He is not the fulfillment.

Why Lord, I thought all this time that Ishmael was the fulfillment of the promise.

No. Sarah, your wife, the only true wife you have, shall have a son. That's what I had in mind 24 years ago, and that is exactly what I have had in mind all the way through, and that is what I have in mind now.

There were two things as the Lord talked with Abraham that greatly perplexed him. One was the obvious impossibility of a child being born to Abraham and Sarah at this age. The other was Ishmael. What about him? Abraham loved Ishmael. He was Abraham's son, his own flesh and blood. And think how his heart must have gone out to him all those 13 years. He carried him in his arms and took him with him. And all the cattle and flocks would someday belong to Ishmael. The heart of the father went out to that growing boy.

But God said, No. This is not what I told you. This is not what I had in mind. Sarah is going to have a child.

As God talked with Abraham, and Abraham talked with God, Abraham at last came to the point of simple, unreserved, undiluted faith, and he grasped the promise. Let's notice how the Scripture describes his experience:

"(As it is written, I have made thee a father of many nations) before Him whom he believed, even God, who quickeneth the dead, and calleth those things which be not as though they were. Who against hope believed in hope, that he might become the father of many nations, according to that which was spoken, So shall thy seed be. And being not weak in faith, he considered not his own body now dead, when he was about an hundred years old, neither yet the deadness of Sarah's womb: He staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief; but was strong in faith, giving glory to God; And being fully persuaded that, what He had promised, He was able also to perform. And therefore it was imputed to him for righteousness" Romans 4:17-22.

So Abraham came at last to faith. This is what God had been waiting for all the time. Through those first 10 years of waiting, and through the added years when Abraham thought the promised had been fulfilled, it had not been fulfilled at all. When there had been a diversion from God's plan, when there had been a substitution of human planning for the divine blueprint, God just waited.

We might wonder why God didn't step in and interfere. There are plenty of people who would like to use God for an errand boy. Many prayers are simply Western Union telegrams to God to hurry up and do something about this thing He has apparently overlooked.

But God was not forgetful. He was not unmindful. He is patient. He wants us to learn the lesson of patience. He was giving Abraham and Sarah opportunity to develop exactly what was in their hearts, but never once did He swerve from His eternal purpose.

So at last, at the age of 99, Abraham arrived at an understanding of the divine plan similar to that which God had all the time. Being strong in faith he reached the promise that the impossible will be done—that which is contrary to human science and human planning will be accomplished. God will by a miracle step in and do that which humanity would have no reason to expect.

Sarah was still unbelieving. Abraham was seated in the door of the tent when three strangers approached. He didn't know who they were. He made them welcome. Hospitality was extended to them. The strangers revealed their heavenly character and divinely appointed mission. And as a part of the message they said, At the appointed time Sarah will have a son.

Sarah was behind the curtain, and she heard. She laughed. It was a laugh of unbelief. Why, the very idea.

The Lord reproved Sarah. Embarrassed and flustered she denied it. But God held her to the point. Nevertheless it is going to be done.

As a result of that Sarah finally came to the point of faith. She finally came to see that the suggestion she had made years before concerning Hagar was out of place, and truly it had brought a great deal of sorrow. It had brought endless grief and confusion and strife in the household. But now Hagar has been set aside. God has made clear His will concerning Sarah.

“Through faith also Sara herself received strength to conceive seed, and was delivered of a child when she was past age, because she judged Him faithful who had promised” Hebrews 11:11.

I thank God for that verse. It gives me courage to believe that there is hope for even old people who have gotten in a groove of partial unbelief and stayed there for years and decades. We need to be delivered from the influence of the custom of our time. We need to be delivered from the influence of science as far as it tells us what the limitations of God are concerned. There are none.

And, my dear friends, we certainly need to be delivered from the curse of pragmatism, which if it works is ok. We see God set all these aside. We hear Him say to Abraham and Sarah, not Ishmael but Isaac. Not the child of the bondwoman,

but the child of the free. Not that child which was born of the flesh, but that child which is born by a miracle of the Spirit of God. This is the appointed heir.

I want to share something interesting from the Spirit of Prophecy. This was published in the Ministry magazine in 1964:

“If you become restless as did Abraham and Sarah, and work up plans of your own in order to bring about God’s promises, a condition of things which you deemed desirable, after your own ways and ideas you will find that it will result in sorrow, misery, and sin” *Manuscript Releases*, Volume 2, pages 336-337.

Paul says we are children of the promise. We are Isaac, not Ishmael. Let us examine ourselves whether we be in the faith.

Through the Bible God foretold the rise and progress of this wonderful Advent message. Among the gifts which He placed in the church is the wonderful gift of the Spirit of Prophecy. And through the thousands of pages in Ellen G. White’s writings, God gave to this people an inspired blueprint concerning every phase of our work—our Sabbath School work, our publishing work, our educational work, our medical work, the training of children in the home, our missionary work—every phase of life is covered.

But I wonder if you have ever heard the comment that times have changed? Have you ever heard that doubtless that instruction was good back there when it was written a hundred years ago, but somehow or another it hasn’t worked? So we have to invent or discover or contrive new plans to keep in the temple of the world around us, and thereby get God’s work done by our human plans. Could it be possible that we might be in danger of being thus influenced?

It not only *could* happen, it *does* happen. It happens whenever we go to Babylon to find out how to run the church of God. It happens whenever we study the fashion plates of the world to find out how Christian women should dress. It happens when we listen to the so-called science of the world in nutrition, in child training, or in any other practical phase of life. It happens when we listen to that so-called science when it is out of harmony with the light from heaven in the Spirit of Prophecy. It happens whenever we become more interested in the approval of our neighbors than in the approval of God. It happens whenever we lose faith in the ultimate triumph of this church. It is as true now as it was in those days of Abraham. God will carry out His promise by a miracle, and Isaac will be born. But Isaac is not Ishmael.

Ishmael’s mother, Hagar, was an Egyptian. It is written, “woe to them that go down to Egypt for help.” Whenever we look to the world for guidance in education, health work, Sabbath School work, missionary work, evangelism, we are in great danger of producing not Isaac but Ishmael, for the mother’s influence is represented in him.

Ishmael is a hybrid. He is anything in our lives or work which represents a combination of a desire to carry out God's will and a willingness to use human methods to do it. And the fact that it works is no defense in God's sight.

In the light of the Scriptures, the methods we use are more important to God than mere human results. Abraham and Hagar together did what Abraham and Sarah had not been able to do for decades. They got results. And there are methods today that get results as far as statistics are concerned that are Ishmael and not Isaac.

One says, "How will we tell the difference?"

It is very simple. Ishmael was born through transgression of God's law. Isaac was born in obedience to God's command. It is that simple.

What is faith? What is the faith that Abraham at last came to at the age of 99? What is the faith that Sarah finally came to some months afterward. Faith is believing what God says when it is contrary to the findings of human science, and the conclusion of human reason. Faith is believing what God says when it looks impossible.

But faith is more than that. Faith is going ahead and acting on the Word of God that looks impossible. Faith is starting out into the Red Sea when every scientific mind would say it is impossible for two million people to get through the arm of the ocean like that. Faith went right ahead and did it.

So faith on the part of Abraham and Sarah, when they were so old it was all impossible, enabled them to do the impossible. And faith is going to enable the remnant church to do the impossible; to carry out God's plans in every phase of our work.

And it matters not how many men and how many generations say it cannot be done, Isaac will at last be born. The remnant will at last appear clad in the robes of Christ's righteousness with every phase of her activity in strict conformity to the will of God as given in the law, the Bible, and the Spirit of Prophecy.

Do you believe that? The Lord grant that we shall have the faith of Abraham and Sarah to believe that all God has promised will at last be done.

Let's come closer home into our own personal experience, for this is where we need help most.

When you and I accepted Jesus, we claimed His promise that if we confess our sins He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. We claimed the promise that God would eventually bring us to the place where, concerning us, it could be said,

"Here is the patience of the saints: here are they that keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus"
Revelation 14:12.

How is it brother and sister? As time has gone on, are we still sure that God is going to bring us to that place where we reflect the image of Jesus fully? Or as the years have passed by and we witness what seems to be failure again and again, do we despair? Do we say? Well, maybe God didn't mean what I thought He meant. Maybe it is impossible for anybody to live in this world without sin. Maybe I have been expecting too much. Maybe the best I can hope for is to just do the best I can, and trust God to make up the deficiencies, and somehow He will accept Ishmael, and Ishmael will live before Him.

The Word of God to your heart and mine is, "At the time appointed, Sarah shall have a son." Isaac, the child of God will be accepted. The only seed through whom the Messiah can come is that miracle child of Isaac. And I mean that God want's you, like Abraham, to grasp the fact that all He has promised will be done.

"Being confident of this very thing, that He which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ" Philippians 1:6.

Has God begun something in your heart and life? His word if pledged to finish it. Has He given you some sorrow for sin? He can deepen that sorrow. Has He caused you to give up some transgressions of His law? He can cause you to give up every sin. Has He developed in your heart some faith? He can increase that faith.

Are there some things in His Word that used to look hard to you, but now are easy? They can all become so. Do you love prayer more than you used to, and still it doesn't have the place in your life it should? Cling to the promise. Do not settle for Ishmael. Do not adjust to the low standards around you. Cling by faith to the fact that all God has promised will be fulfilled; that in your life the life of Jesus will be fulfilled and manifested. It can be so.

"And being not weak in faith, he considered not his own body now dead, when he was about an hundred years old, neither yet the deadness of Sarah's womb: He staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief; but was strong in faith, giving glory to God; And being fully persuaded that, what he had promised, he was able also to perform. And therefore it was imputed to him for righteousness. Now it was not written for his sake alone, that it was imputed to him; But for us also, to whom it shall be imputed, if we believe on him that raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead; Who was delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification" Romans 4:19-25.

This is written down for us, if we believe. That experience of partial faith which led into unbelief, and finally disobedience, prevented Abraham and Sarah for nearly a quarter of a century from receiving all that God desired.

And if any of us have wandered along the pilgrim way a quarter of a century or more with only a partial fulfillment, let us not for one moment lessen our

expectations and decrease our hopes. Let us rather reach up the hand of faith higher and still higher. Saying, "Lord, no matter if the passing time seems to make it look more and more impossible for me to ever be like Jesus, I believe that He Who died to redeem me, Who rose to save me, and lives to make intercession, will save me to the uttermost."

But somebody says, "Look at all the years you have been trying. Where have you gotten?"

My answer is, I am not looking at what I am, but what Jesus is. I am not looking at accomplishments. I am looking at His promise. That's what faith is. That's how Abraham and Sarah succeeded at last. That is the way you and I will succeed at last.

In the coming time of trouble we are about to enter into, as it reaches its climax in the time of Jacob's trouble, you and I are going to be tried to the utmost. And as we look at our lives, it will seem that we have made a complete failure. But thank God, we will have learned to trust the Word of God so that we will cling to that Word despite all the evidences of our senses. This is the experience that God is seeking to lead us into day by day.

The thing that feeds faith is listening to the Word of God. Faith cometh by hearing and hearing by the Word of God. So if we want more of this faith, let us find it on our knees, opening the Bible and the *Testimonies*, and letting God speak to our hearts as we talk to Him and with Him. His Word received into our hearts will quicken faith in our soul. If we need more faith, we can get it as we take more of the Word.

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