

Isaac or Ishmael

#0543

Study Given by W. D. Frazee—July 27, 1968

It's a joy to be with you again. And as we've worshipped God in song and prayer and with our gifts and tithes, we come now to hear His voice speaking to us through His Word.

Let us turn to Galatians the fourth chapter. You will remember that the apostle tells us in Romans 15:

"For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning..." Romans 15:4.

And so, the New Testament draws heavily on both the precepts and the narratives of the Old Testament in bringing us the Gospel message. And our scripture this morning is an example of this, Galatians the 4th chapter beginning with the 22nd verse:

"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.

Now, in this scripture, Paul tells us that what happened back there in the days of Abraham is an allegory, that is, a parable. We may learn some lessons from it. He draws some parallels. He compares Agar and Ishmael to certain spiritual

experiences, and Isaac, on the other hand, in contrast. He says that we, like Isaac, are the children of promise.

Now, let us see this morning as we review the history if God will bless us in learning some precious lessons applicable to our present experience.

You will remember that God selected Abraham when he was over there in Ur of the Chaldees and made him certain promises and told him that he was to leave where he was and come over into a land that 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.

You will remember that God gave him a promise that he would have seed as numberless as the stars, like the sands on the seashore. And it is written that Abraham believed God. At this time, at the age of 75, Abraham had no children. Sarah was barren. And so, the years went on. More than once during those years, God appeared to him and renewed the promise. Abraham kept believing.

But as time went on and there was no heir, no seed, finally the day came that Sarah came to Abraham and said, "Abraham, you remember that 10 years ago God promised us a son."

"Yes."

"And we've 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 that we need to do to help carry out God's will and thus fulfill His promise.

"So," she said, "I suggest that my maid carry on the physiological function of childbearing in this case and that we have a son by her."

Now, sitting here this morning in this sanctuary, that whole thing doubtless looks to us repulsive. I hope it does. And we wonder how anyone could think of such a thing. But may I tell you (and this is one of the first lessons that God would impress on our hearts this morning), in this 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.

It was an accepted practice when a woman after she was married could not bear children for her to give her maid, her servant, to her husband that that maid might do that part of the wifely duty which she obviously was unable to carry on. And so I repeat, Sarah was merely in harmony with the customs of her time.

So, Abraham and Sarah together talked it over. They may have prayed about it. I don't know. 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. An heir, at last, had been born.

Now, may I call your attention to two other features of this? It was not only in harmony with the customs of the time, it was scientific. By that, I mean it was obvious that Sarah was past the time when a child could be expected. That's what the Bible says. And even in her fertile years, she was barren. And here was a girl, a handmaiden of Sarah, she could do that, physiologically she could supply the place that Sarah could not fill. And it worked. What Sarah had been unable to do, Hagar did. And so, at last, the child was born.

Keep in mind these three things, then. First, what was done was in harmony with the spirit and custom of the times. Second, it was scientific. And third, it worked; it got results. And anybody knows that's the main thing, isn't it? Or is it? Well, let us see.

Time went on. Ishmael grew from infancy into childhood, and from childhood, he entered the teen years. And just as he was entering the teen years, a revelation came to Abraham. This is 13 years after the birth of Ishmael. And may I tell you, friends, 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 the years of understanding. God's promise had been fulfilled. Abraham had a son. This was the heir promised of heaven.

But finally, one day when Abraham is 99 years old, the Lord appears to him and says in effect, "Abraham, do you remember that promise I made you when you were 75 years old, that you were to have a son?"

"Yes, Lord, I remember that. And I'm so glad it's been granted."

"No," the Lord says, "that promise has never been fulfilled yet."

"Oh, yes. Here's Ishmael."

"No. He's not the fulfillment."

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

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

And there were two things that, as the Lord talked with Abraham, greatly perplexed him. One was the obvious impossibility of a child being born to Abraham and Sarah at this age.

The other was, "Here was Ishmael. What about him?"

Abraham loved Ishmael. He was his son, his own flesh and blood. And think how his heart must have gone out to him all those 13 years, as first he carried him in his arms and then took him around with him. And all those cattle, all the herds and

the flocks, they all someday would belong to Ishmael. And the heart of the father went out to that growing boy.

And now God says, “No. This is not what I told you. This is not what I had in mind. Sarah is going to have a son.”

But finally, 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.

Turn now, please, to the 4th chapter of Romans, the 17th verse, and let us notice how the scripture describes his experience at this point:

“(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...” Romans 4:17–19.

Watch:

“...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 4:19–22.

So, you see, Abraham came at last to faith. And this is what God had been waiting for all the time, my friends. Through those first 10 years of waiting, and then through those added years when Abraham thought the promise was fulfilled and it hadn’t 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 waiting.

We might wonder why God didn’t step in and interfere. There are plenty of people that 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 and that that apparently He’s overlooked.

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

And so at last, at the age of 99, Abraham arrives at an understanding of the divine plan similar to that which God had had all the time. And so, being strong in

faith, he reaches the promise that the impossible will be done—that that which is contrary to human science and human planning will be accomplished, that God will by a miracle step in and do that which humanity would have no reason to expect.

But there was Sarah. What about her heart? Well, she was still unbelieving. You'll find that as you read the record of the visit of Jesus and the two angels not too long after this visit of God with Abraham when he was 99.

You remember that Abraham was seated there in the tent door. These three strangers approached. He didn't know who they were, but he made them welcome. Hospitality was extended to them. And as the meal progressed, these strangers revealed their heavenly character and their divinely-appointed mission.

And as a part of the message they had come from heaven to deliver, they said, "At the appointed time, Sarah will have a son."

And Sarah was back behind the curtains, and she heard. And there was a little laugh back there, a laugh of incredulity, unbelief.

"Why, the very idea, the very idea."

And the Lord reproved her, and at that, embarrassed and flustered she denied, but God held her right to the point and said, "Yes, you laughed. Nevertheless, it's going to be done."

Now, do you know what Sarah came to, as the result of that? She came to faith. I want you to turn to Hebrews 11 and see that good old Sarah, dear old Sarah, she finally came to the point of faith. She finally came to see that that suggestion that she'd made years before concerning Hagar was all out of place. And truly it had brought a great deal of sorrow. We might go into that part of it if we had time this morning. 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.

Listen, Hebrews the 11th chapter and the 11th verse:

"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.

Oh, I thank God for that verse, friends. It gives me courage to believe that even old people who have gotten in a groove of partial unbelief and have stayed there in that rut for years and decades, there's hope for them, friends, there's hope. There's hope for young and old if we'll listen to the message from heaven and be willing to set aside what we have thought all our lives is the way to do things.

We need to be delivered from the influence of the custom of our times. 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 no limitations. And oh, my dear friends,

we certainly need to be delivered from the curse of pragmatism, which is this: if it works it's okay.

As we see, God set all these aside, as He said to Abraham and Sarah, “*Not* Ishmael, but Isaac. *Not* the child of the bondwoman, but the child of the free. *Not* that child who is born after the flesh, but that child who is born by a miracle of the Spirit of God. This is the appointed heir.”

I want to share something interesting with you from the Spirit of Prophecy. It's in the Ellen G. White *Manuscript* 3 of 1892. This was published in the *Ministry Magazine* of November 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.

May I read this again?

“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” *Ibid*.

Now, let us see if the Lord will help us in some practical applications this morning. Paul says we're children of the promise [see Galatians 4:28–31]. We're Isaac, not Ishmael. Are we? Let us examine ourselves, whether we be in the faith [a paraphrase of 2 Corinthians 13:5].

Through the Bible, God foretold the rise and progress of this wonderful advent message. Among the gifts which He placed in this church is the wonderful gift of the Spirit of Prophecy. And through the thousands of pages in the Ellen G. White writings, God gave 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, dear friends, have you ever heard the comment, “Times have changed”?

Have you ever heard the comment, “Doubtless that instruction was good back there when it was written a hundred years ago, or sixty years ago, but somehow or another, it hasn't worked. And so, we have to invent, or discover, or contrive new plans to keep in the tempo 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, my friends? Could that happen? It not only *could* happen, but it does also happen. It happens, my friends, 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 whenever we listen to the so-called science of the world, in nutrition, in child training, or in any other practical phase of life, 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 the approval of God. It happens whenever we lose faith in the ultimate triumph of this church, this movement. 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, my friends.

Do you remember who the mother of Ishmael was? We've mentioned her name. What was it? Do you remember her nationality? Anybody remember the nationality of Hagar? An Egyptian, correct. And it is written:

"Woe to them that go down to Egypt for help..." Isaiah 31:1.

And whenever we look to the world for guidance, in our education, in our health work, in our Sabbath school work, in our missionary work, in our evangelism, we are in great danger, my friends, of producing not Isaac but Ishmael, for the mother's blood, the mother's life, the mother's influence is represented in Ishmael.

Ishmael is a hybrid. Ishmael is anything in our lives or in our work that 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.

Does it make any difference *how* we get our ingathering goal? Or is the important thing simply to get it? There are *ways* and there are *ways*. Ah, my friends, 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.

Says one, "How will we tell the difference?"

Well, it's very simple, my friends. Ishmael was born through the transgression of God's law. Isaac was born in obedience to God's command. It's 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 few weeks or 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. And faith is *more* than that. Faith is going ahead and acting on that Word of God which looks impossible. Faith is starting out into the Red Sea when every scientific mind would say it's impossible for two million people to get through an arm of the ocean like that. Faith went right ahead and did it.

And so, faith on the part of Abraham and faith on the part of Sarah, when they were old, so old that it was all impossible, faith enabled them to *do* the impossible. And faith is going to enable the remnant church at last to *do* the impossible, my friends, 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, my friends. The remnant church 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 us in the law of God, the Bible and the Spirit of Prophecy.

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

Now, let us come closer home into our own personal experience. For my dear friends this is perhaps where we need the 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 to cleanse us from all unrighteousness"
1 John 1:9.

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, sister, fellow pilgrims? 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've 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 that He'll accept Ishmael and that Ishmael will live before Him."

The Word of God to your heart and mine is, "At the time appointed...Sarah shall have a son" Genesis 18:14.

And not Ishmael with his Egyptian mother, but Isaac, the child of promise will be accepted. The only seed through whom the Messiah can come is that miracle child of Isaac. And I mean by that, my dear brother, that God wants you like Abraham to grasp the fact that *all* He has promised will be done.

Turn to Philippians the first chapter and the sixth verse, will you? For here is indeed a wonderful promise, a wonderful promise, and it is for us this morning.

“Being confident of this very thing, that He which hath begun a good work in you will *finish* it...” Philippians 1:6.

The margin says.

“...until the day of Jesus Christ” Philippians 1:6.

Has God begun something in your heart and life? His Word is 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 that it should? Cling to the promise. Do not settle for Ishmael. Do not adjust to the low standards around you. Cling by faith, as Abraham and Sarah at last did, to the fact that *all* that God has promised will be fulfilled, that in your life, the life of Jesus shall be completely duplicated, fulfilled, manifested. It can be so, my dear friends.

How? Oh, let's turn back to Romans the 4th chapter again, the 19th verse, and note what Paul says this was all written down for:

“And being not weak in faith, he considered not his own body now dead...” Romans 4:19.

He didn't look at the evidences. He looked at the promise of God. That's what faith is.

“...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 4:19–22.

Now, look:

“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 4:23–25.

Who’s all this written down for? For us, *if* we believe. It’s 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 my dear friends, if any of us have wandered along the pilgrim way a quarter of a century, a half a century, or more with only a partial fulfillment, let us not, oh I plead with you, let us not for one *moment* lessen in our expectations, 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 and rose to save me and lives to make intercession for me will save me to the uttermost. I believe it by faith.”

“Ah,” but somebody says, “look at all the years you’ve been trying. Where have you gotten?”

Ah, friend, my answer is, “I am looking not at what I am but at what *He* is. I’m not looking at accomplishments. I’m looking at His promise.”

That’s what faith is. That’s the way Abraham succeeded at last. That’s the way Sarah succeeded at last. That’s the way you and I will succeed at last.

You know, in this coming time of trouble we’re about to enter into, as it reaches its climax in 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’ve made a complete failure. But thank God, we will have learned so to trust the Word of God 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.

Now, the thing that feeds faith is listening to the Word of God. Paul tells us in Romans 10:

“...Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God” Romans 10:17.

So friends, if we want more of this faith, if we need more of this faith, let us find it on our knees, opening the Bible and the testimonies, letting God speak to our hearts as we talk back *to* Him and *with* Him, visiting back and forth. His Word received into our hearts will quicken faith in our souls. If we need more faith, we can get it as we take more of the Word. Here are the spiritual vitamins and minerals, the proteins, if you please, which will build the muscles of our body that we may, like Abraham, be strong in faith.

Now, we have a few minutes before the usual time of dismissal, and I would like to do what I always enjoy very much, and that is, take time for a few responses as we close this meeting. I'd like to for just a few minutes step down with you in the audience, and I'd like to have different ones just in a sentence say what God has blessed your soul with this morning, while it's fresh in your mind.

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