

## Bethel Bible-Presbyterian Church

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### DHW LESSON 15

#### THE BOOK OF GENESIS

#### CHAPTER 21

#### INTRODUCTION

In our walk with God, there will be times when we feel that He is not listening to our prayers and petitions. We pray but do not see the answer in sight. We become discouraged, and we begin to lose our trust and faith in Him. We skip church; stop reading the Bible and stop praying to Him. This chapter will serve as an encouragement for us. God answers prayers at His appointed time.

We make choices every day. Should we not give up our favourite pastime and go to prayer meeting? How do we prioritize? Some decisions have more serious implications than others. Should we not ask God to help to make the right decisions? Or are we afraid to ask God because we may not like His answer?

As Christians we should respect one another not only to Christians but also to non-Christians so that we may live in peace and righteousness all the time. We need to know our Lord enough to trust Him every moment of our lives for God showers His blessings on those who trust and obey Him.

Genesis 21 can be divided into the following parts:

1. The LORD kept His Word by giving Abraham and Sarah a son in their old age (21:1-8);

2. Sarah's told Abraham to get rid of Hagar and Ishmael (21:9-13);
3. Abraham obeyed God by sending Hagar and Ishmael away (21:14-21);
4. King Abimelech recognised that God had blessed Abraham and requested that they sign a treaty of goodwill together (21:22-32);
5. Abraham worshipped the LORD and sojourned in the land of the Philistines for a long time (21:33-34).

#### STUDY THE WORD

#### The LORD Is Faithful to His Word

The promised son was born to Abraham and Sarah when they were one hundred years old and ninety years old respectively. Abraham was seventy-five years old when God gave him the promise (Genesis 12:4; 15:4). The age of Abraham is especially mentioned in verse five to emphasize the wonderful truth that the LORD God is a powerful God who can do all things according to His will.

Three things are emphasized with regard to the birth of Isaac. The child was named *Isaac* just as God had told them to name the child (Genesis 17:19). Then it is highlighted that God *did unto Sarah* the promise He had earlier *spoken* to her and fulfilled it *at His set time* (verses 1, 2). All these features emphatically signify the

integrity and faithfulness of God – He said, He promised, and He did in His time! He is never too early or too late. There are some valuable lessons to learn. By nature we are impatient creatures. We need to learn that delays do not imply inaction. God has His appointed time in fulfilling His promises. So, when we pray and make our petitions to God, let us make sure that we first pray in accordance with the will of God. God will surely answer at the right time.

Abraham now needed to perform his duty by circumcising Isaac on the eighth day. He must circumcise Isaac because it was God’s commandment. If a child born to the people of God was not circumcised, his child would be deprived of the special covenant blessings which were promised to Abraham. Today, *we are the children of Abraham* as the Word of God declares (Galatians 3:7). And as we are engrafted into the family of Abraham by faith in Christ Jesus, we share the same blessing God had bestowed on Abraham (Galatians 3:9). We receive the promise of the Holy Spirit by grace through faith in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:14). We are living in the period of the New Testament. Water baptism is the sign of the new covenant. As believing parents, we present our infant child for baptism in accordance with the commandment of God.

In a state of joyful exuberance, Sarah testified that God had made her to laugh. This time her laughter was not of doubt but of inexplicable joy. Other people would be so astonished to say that *Sarah should have given children suck* (verse 7). The infant child grew and soon was weaned. Abraham then threw a great feast on the very day when Isaac was

weaned. It was a celebration of joy and happiness.

### Sarah Tells Abraham to Get Rid of Hagar & Ishmael

Abraham threw a great feast when Isaac was weaned<sup>1</sup>. There was great rejoicing but Sarah was observing Ishmael and she saw that he, who was now fourteen years old, and a big brother of the infant brother, was “mocking.” The text did not say the precise nature of Ishmael’s mocking (Hebrew, *metschaq*) and can be translated “to laugh, to make jest of.” The intensive form of the verb suggests more than mere laughing or jesting. The Apostle Paul commented Ishmael as “persecuting” Isaac (Galatians 4:29)<sup>2</sup>. This explains that Ishmael’s attitude was not just mere laughing or mild poking fun at his infant brother. The sense suggests a malicious kind of laughter which Paul commented as tantamount to persecution. It is understandable that Ishmael was jealous of Isaac, who would now displace him as the heir of Abraham. While Ishmael did not resort to physical abuse, nevertheless Sarah realized that their relationship down the road would not be good. Envy could lead to more serious act of violence. Accordingly, she told Abraham to send *this bondwoman and her son; for the son of the bondwoman, shall not be heir with my son even with Isaac* (verse 10). Observe that she did not mention Hagar and Ishmael by name. This further suggests Ishmael had been continuously

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<sup>1</sup> Isaac would be about two or three years when he was weaned.

<sup>2</sup> Galatians 4:29 But as then he that was born after the flesh persecuted him that was born after the Spirit, even so *it is* now.

“mocking” Isaac, and this caused Sarah to be intolerantly antagonistic towards Ishmael to the extent that even to mention their names was deplorable. Abraham was “very grievous” when Sarah told him to cast out Hagar and Ishmael, who was also his son, and one whom he took a great liking to (Genesis 17:18-20). The word “grievous” (Hebrew, *yara*) means to be shakily displeased (verse 10).

The LORD knew Abraham’s predicament. The LORD told him not to be shakily displeased because of the lad and his bondwoman. The LORD took Sarah’s side by reminding him that Isaac was the promised son. In comforting Abraham, the LORD would also make a great nation through Ishmael, because he too was Abraham’s seed. Hence, the LORD instructed Abraham to do as Sarah had requested.

### Abraham Sends Hagar & Ishmael Away

We may argue that it was all right for Hagar and Ishmael to remain with Abraham. Ishmael could be disciplined to accept the fact that Isaac was the rightful heir. Whatever good reasons we can marshal to support Hagar and Ishmael’s case, one strong reason against it was our Lord’s specific instructions. Isaac was the promised and chosen heir. The fact that Ishmael was not chosen did not mean that God did not care for him and his mother. Our LORD, the omniscient God, who knows the End from the Beginning, knows what is best. By implication, their remaining with the family would develop insurmountable problems. With the benefit of hindsight today, we see that even though they had been separated, the descendants of Ishmael and Isaac continue

to be at enmity with no clear sign of an amicable and peaceful solution. Abraham trusted and obeyed God by sending Ishmael and Hagar away.

It was a touching scene as Abraham sent Hagar and Ishmael away. He woke early in the morning, prepared provisions and water for them and *putting it on her shoulder, and the child*. Hagar departed and wandered in the wilderness of Beersheba. Soon the water in the bottle was spent and there was no more water. What Abraham could not do for Hagar and Ishmael, God did. God took charge of the situation. Hagar put Ishmael, who was probably exhausted and weak, near a shrub, saying that she could not bear to see her son’s death. Hagar sat a distance away and *lifted up her voice, and wept* (v.16). God heard the voice of Ishmael and the cry of his mother. The Angel of God, who called out of heaven, told Hagar not to fear for God had heard the voice of Ishmael, her son (verse 17). The Angel of God told Hagar to lift up Ishmael and said: *I will make him a great nation* (verse 18). The personal pronoun used by the Angel of God is significant for it shows that He was not an ordinary angel who could make the promise and have the power to fulfil it. The Angel of God was none other than the Second Person of the Godhead, the Lord Jesus Christ!

God provided her water from a well where she went and filled her bottle with water and gave Ishmael a drink. The statement, *God was with the lad*, who was also Abraham’s seed, is a loaded statement. If God is with a person, that person needs nobody else to protect and provide for all his needs and even more. Ishmael in the wilderness became an archer, a hunter. They eventually settled in

the wilderness of Paran, and Hagar, being an Egyptian, chose an Egyptian wife for him. The narrative on Ishmael ends here with the statement that *God was with the lad* (v.20). He was mentioned only once again when Abraham died (Genesis 25:9-18).

### **King Abimelech Recognises God's Blessings on Abraham**

Abimelech, the king of Gerar, came with Phichol, his army Commander-in-Chief to talk peace with Abraham. Abimelech shrewdly began his talk with Abraham by acknowledging that God had been with Abraham in all his endeavours (verse 22). Saying good things about a person before demanding something from him is a smart way of getting his attention and approval. While Abimelech resorted to this tactic, his testimony of Abraham was a fact. He was not insincere and did not lie about it just in order to please him.

He demanded Abraham to swear in the name of God that the latter would not deal falsely and hypocritically with him, or with his son, or with his son's son. In short, Abraham should deal with him and his people with honesty and integrity. He gave the reason why Abraham ought to swear to it because he had treated him kindly and also by letting him dwell in the land. Abimelech was fearful that should Abraham become very powerful one day, he might declare war and remove Abimelech and his people. It is quite clear that Abimelech wanted to provide a certain amount of security and protection for his descendants. Their dialogue contained mutual respect for each other. There was no apology or reference to their past.

Abraham agreed but took the opportunity to settle a current matter involving a disputed well. Abraham complained that a well, dug by his servants, was forcibly taken away by Abimelech's men. Abimelech denied any knowledge of it until that day. In a gesture of goodwill to show that he too sought peace, Abraham gave Abimelech sheep and cattle for the ratification of the covenant they had agreed upon. Abraham went the second mile by offering Abimelech seven ewe lambs. When the latter asked him the reason for that extra gift, Abraham said to him that the gift was a witness that the well had been dug by him (verse 29). In this way Abraham ensured no further dispute on that well by men from Abimelech's camp in future. The origin of the name given to the place is here given – *Beersheba* (meaning: “well of the sevenfold oath). Abimelech and Phichol peacefully returned to the land of the Philistines,

### **Abraham Worships the LORD in the Land of the Philistines**

Abraham planted a tamarisk tree (Hebrew, *'eschel*) not “a grove” (Hebrew, *asheyrah*, meaning an image or idol) in Beersheba as a memorial tree. It was a memorial to Abraham of God's blessing of fruitfulness and prosperity towards him. Abraham then called *the name of the LORD, the everlasting God* (verse 33). This is the only occasion in Genesis that God was referred to in this name: in Hebrew, *yahweh, el olam* (literally translated, LORD, GOD FOREVER). Abraham had the freedom to move freely and settle wherever he wished in the land of the Philistines.

### *PRACTICAL VALUE*

The first lesson we learn is the wonderful truth that God is faithful in all the promises He has made. He demonstrated it here so clearly that we cannot miss it: he promised what He would do and He fulfilled His promise. Although there was a long delay in fulfilling His promise, the important thing is that He kept His Word in His set time. Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God has promised that He will return to take His disciples to be with Him. More than two thousand years have passed and He has not come. We should not be discouraged or disbelieving. We need to keep trusting and serving Him. He will come as He promised and His timing will be always right. And the fact that Abraham and Sarah were blessed in their old age indicates that there is no age restriction for God to bless His people and do something in and through them. One is never too old to receive God's blessing. What an encouragement to us all!

When Isaac was born, Abraham circumcised him when he was eight days old. Isaac as an infant needed not to know all about the covenant which God made with Abraham in order to circumcise him. This was in obedience to God's commandment (Genesis 17:12). God's covenant made with Abraham was an unconditional and sovereign covenant which was best for him and his descendants. Any child of his who was not circumcised would be cut off from the national community of Israel and deprived of the blessings that God would bestow on them. Similarly, as Christians, and the spiritual children of Abraham, we should present our infants to be baptised in

accordance with the covenant God made with us.

There are times when the choices which we have to make are very difficult. Abraham had to choose either to retain Hagar and Ishmael or cast them out of the household. He could only make that decision after God revealed to him that Sarah's idea was right. In such situations, we need to seek God's directions from His Word. Prayerfully, God will lead us to make the right decision. Having discovered God's direction and will, we need to be strong and courageous to carry it out even though it hurts. If we carry it out by faith, we would taste the goodness and greatness of God in our life, just as Abraham had.

The dialogue between Abimelech and Abraham to resolve some conflicting issues is instructive. Both men had some problems. Abimelech was fearful of Abraham that one day he might overpower and destroy him. Abraham took this surprise meeting to settle a well which had been forcefully taken by Abimelech's men. The two men respectfully engaged in their dialogue. They did not dig out ugly bones which had been buried. They concentrated in the present issues. They drew an agreement and formally agreed on it. Abraham even went the second mile by being generous to Abimelech in order to formally seal the agreement. Both of them parted amicably.

In this chapter we are reminded of Ecclesiastes 3:1-4: . . . *there is a time to heal . . . there is a time to laugh . . . there is a time to mourn.* AMEN