

International Sunday School Lesson Study Notes

Lesson Text: Genesis 21:12-14, 17-21; 26:2-5, 12-13

Lesson Title: A Blessing for Ishmael and Isaac

Introduction

Remember Sarah's suggestion to Abraham that they have a son by her handmaid Hagar (Genesis 16:1-2)? It's been a long time since she came up with that plan to help God fulfill His promise that Abraham would be the father of a great nation. God miraculously gave Abraham and Sarah a son, Isaac. But Ishmael, the son of Abraham and Hagar is still in the family portrait. And he is a daily reminder of the consequences of bad choices.

Although Abraham was the friend of God and a man of faith, his choices in life had left his family in a mess. While acts of sin are forgivable, the effects of some sins are not removable. Ishmael has been a sore spot between Abraham and Sarah for fourteen years. Ishmael has problems himself with Isaac. He sees Isaac as a rival and Sarah's motherly heart wants to defend her Isaac. Sarah has reached the boiling point and she unloads her feelings to Abraham. Sarah wants Abraham to "*cast out this bondwoman and her son*" (Genesis 21:10).

The feelings in Sarah's heart were "*very grievous*" to Abraham (Genesis 21:11). After all, Ishmael is also his son. Abraham is caught in the middle of a no-win situation, but God steps in to point the way.

God and Ishmael (Genesis 21:12-14, 17-21)

Verse 12

"And God said unto Abraham, Let it not be grievous in thy sight because of the lad, and because of thy bondwoman; in all that Sarah hath said unto thee, hearken unto her voice; for in Isaac shall thy seed be called."

Abraham's reaction to all of this family tension and stress is understandable. However, God didn't want Abraham to get discouraged and distressed over this situation. He tells Abraham to "hearken" or do whatever Sarah tells him to do. Does that sound strange? It might if you don't believe in the sovereignty of God. Sarah's reactions, right or wrong were still under the control of God. God said to

Abraham, "...in Isaac shall thy seed be called." Biologically, Ishmael was Abraham's son but through Isaac the promise of a great nation would be fulfilled.

God had a purpose in the sibling rivalry between Ishmael and Isaac. He also had a purpose in Sarah's reaction. God knew Ishmael couldn't continue to live under the same roof as Isaac and Sarah. God used Sarah's emotional decision to ask Abraham to drive Hagar and Ishmael away for a higher purpose of His glory.

The conflict between Ishmael and Isaac is a picture of the conflict the believer has between the law and grace and the flesh and the Spirit (Galatians 4:21-31). Ishmael (the flesh) caused problems for Isaac, just as our old nature causes problems for us (Galatians 5:16). Ishmael created no problems in the home until Isaac was born, just as our old nature creates no problems for us until the new nature enters when we trust Christ for salvation. In Abraham's home we see the same basic conflicts that we Christians face today.

Verse 13

"And also of the son of the bondwoman will I make a nation, because he is thy seed."

The words "And also" are words of hope. Although the plan, conception, and birth of Ishmael represent a work of the flesh, God will take care of Ishmael and his mother Hagar. Ishmael had been the focus of Abraham's love and attention until the birth of Isaac. God will not only make a great nation of Isaac, but He promises Abraham that He "will make a nation" from Ishmael "because he is Abraham's seed." This promise must have relieved much of Abraham's anxiety and worry. There will be a future for Hagar and her son Ishmael.

It's just like God to take foolish choices and tragedy and turn it around for His glory. If you don't think that's true, what about Eve's choice in the Garden of Eden? What about Adam's choice to participate with Eve's decision to eat of the forbidden fruit? And what about the many choices you have made? That doesn't mean God overlooks our sinful choices and bad decisions. What it does mean is that God is God of purpose and grace (Romans 8:28-29).

Verse 14

"And Abraham rose up early in the morning, and took bread, and a bottle of water, and gave it unto Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, and the child, and sent her away: and she departed, and wandered in the wilderness of Beer-sheba."

There is nothing in these verses to indicate that casting out Hagar and Ishmael was easy for Abraham. Sometimes we have to do things that are not easy and leave the results to God. While Abraham's actions were not easy, he carried out God's instructions in submissive obedience as indicated in the words, "And Abraham rose up early in the morning." Abraham's obedience in this matter was another step in his spiritual progress. No matter how difficult obedience is at times it is still right to obey the Lord (1 Samuel 15:22).

There is no large group of people to witness the exit of Hagar and her son. Abraham hands Hagar "bread, and a bottle of water" and she and "the child" are "sent away." Hagar is once again in the "wilderness" with her teenage son (Genesis 16:6-7). Separated from Abraham and all her earthly security Hagar begins her southeasterly journey with minimal provisions and a lot of questions. Things may look bleak for her and her son but they have a future because God is in control.

In which direction are you traveling today? How are things looking? How long will your provisions hold out? All of us have these questions from time to time and sometimes we don't know the answer. What you can know today if you are God's child is that He will take care of you (Psalm 37:25; 1 Peter 5:7).

Verse 17

"And God heard the voice of the lad; and the angel of God called Hagar out of heaven, and said unto her, What aileth thee, Hagar? fear not; for God hath heard the voice of the lad where he is."

It doesn't take long for Hagar and Ishmael's provisions to run out. When their water was gone Hagar placed Ishmael "under one of the shrubs" (Genesis 21:15) and "she went, and sat her down over against him a good way off, as it were a bowshot" or about fifty yards (Genesis 21:16). She obviously is positioning herself and her son for death. Hagar "lifted up her voice and wept" (Genesis 21:16). According to the text, both Hagar and Ishmael were lifting up their voice. "God heard the voice of the lad where he is" but He responded to Hagar.

Are you there today? Maybe you are in a "wilderness" wasteland today like Hagar and Ishmael. It may be a spiritual wilderness, financial wilderness, emotional wilderness or marital wilderness. The water and provisions have run out and all you have left is God's promise. It's okay to cry out. God still hears! Just because you have made bad choices or you are the recipient or participant in the bad choices of others doesn't mean God has abandoned you.

"What aileth thee, Hagar? fear not; for God hath heard the voice of the lad where he is." Try to put yourself in Hagar's place. She has been cast out of her home and given only a few provisions that have now run out. She is alone with her son and death is staring them both in the face. Right in the middle of all her misery God speaks to Hagar. He's been there the entire time watching over her. God called her by name, "Hagar." God cared about her. He asked, "What aileth thee?" He wanted her to know that He knew her and that he had "heard the voice of the lad." God comforted her. He said, "Fear not." It is the same words of comfort He spoke to Abraham (Genesis 15:1), Isaac (Genesis 26:4), Daniel (Daniel 10:12), and John (Revelation 1:17).

Verse 18

"Arise, lift up the lad, and hold him in thine hand; for I will make him a great nation."

"Arise, lift up the lad, and hold him in this hand" literally means "bind fast thine hand to him, give him the support he needs." God wanted Hagar to watch over Ishmael and take care of him until he reached manhood because God was going to "make him a great nation" through him. The angel of the Lord previously had told Hagar some things about the future of Ishmael when she ran away (see Genesis 16:11, 12). Now the promise is expanded: "I will make him a great nation."

Verse 19

"And God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water; and she went, and filled the bottle with water, and gave the lad drink."

Becoming a "great nation" would start with God providing the little things. That is still true today in our lives. The actions of God on behalf of Hagar in "opening her eyes" speaks of God's providential guidance of Hagar to "a well of water." No doubt the "well of water" had been there the entire time but for whatever reason Hagar was unable to see it. There are things working in your behalf today even though you can't see it. When the time is right God will show you. That's what He does! And when the Lord showed Hagar the available water, "she went, and filled the bottle with water, and gave the lad drink."

Verse 20

"And God was with the lad; and he grew, and dwelt in the wilderness, and became an archer."

"And God was with the lad" means God was with Ishmael in the sense of guiding him and moving him toward the special promise to make of him a great nation. Ishmael may have been removed from Abraham and Sarah's presence but he wasn't removed from the presence of the Lord. Sometimes life moves us away from our security or our comfort zones but it never moves us away from God.

Ishmael "grew" or, progressed toward manhood, "dwelt in the wilderness" which means he lived an unsettled life. He "became an archer" is a reference to his hunting skills that would be a great asset in keeping himself and his mother alive by providing food for their table. In spite of being cast out from Abraham's home life is still going forward for Ishmael.

Verse 21

"And he dwelt in the wilderness of Paran: and his mother took him a wife out of the land of Egypt."

"The new home of Hagar and Ishmael 'in the wilderness of Paran' means that the two have moved farther south. The region of Paran is in the Sinai Peninsula, which is just east of Egypt (compare Numbers 10:12). Ishmael needs a wife in order for him to become a great nation, so in a culture of arranged marriages, his mother turns to her native Egypt to meet that need (compare Genesis 24:1-4). The rest of the story for Ishmael has several factors of interest. Genesis 25:7-9 states that Ishmael and Isaac are together again to bury Abraham when he dies at the age of 175. At that time Ishmael is age 89 and Isaac is 75. We can only wonder about the conversations and the farewells that took place! Genesis 25:12-18 specifies that Ishmael has 12 sons and names them. The general regions where they live are listed. Ishmael will die at the age of 137, and the promises made to Abraham and Hagar indeed come to pass." (*Standard Lesson Commentary 2013-2014*).

God and Isaac (Genesis 26:2-5, 12-13)

The promised son Isaac goes through many exciting and challenging events between his birth and our text in Genesis 26. There was of course the tension between him and Ishmael that led to the events we just covered in Genesis 21. Then there was the great test of Abraham's faith in offering up Isaac as a sacrifice in Genesis 22. Genesis 24 records that glorious story of how Abraham sent for Rebekah to be Isaac's bride. Genesis 25-26 records the death of Sarah, Isaac's mother and Abraham, Isaac's father.

While God was gracious in blessing Ishmael His divine plan was to bless Isaac. It would be through Isaac's seed that the nation of Israel would be blessed and Messiah would come.

Verse 2-3

"And the LORD appeared unto him, and said, Go not down into Egypt; dwell in the land which I shall tell thee of: Sojourn in this land, and I will be with thee, and will bless thee; for unto thee, and unto thy seed, I will give all these countries, and I will perform the oath which I sware unto Abraham thy father"

Genesis 26:1 tells us, *"And there was a famine in the land, beside the first famine that was in the days of Abraham. And Isaac went unto Abimelech king of the Philistines unto Gerar."* Famine was never far away for those living in Palestine. A year without rain and there would be a famine. It was part of life. This "famine" no doubt caused Isaac to move his family from Canaan. Isaac may have only intended to stay a short time in "Gerar," the capitol city of the Philistines while on his way to Egypt, but it ends up becoming a permanent place of residence.

The text indicates that although Isaac was in "Gerar," he was on his way to "Egypt." That's what his father had done 100 years ago when he faced a famine. "Egypt" usually had plentiful crops and food so it was just natural to go to "Egypt" in a famine. But "the LORD appeared unto him" and said, "Go not down in Egypt; dwell in the land which I shall tell thee of." This was the first appearance of God to Isaac, and God told him clearly, "Don't go down to Egypt."

God's command "Go not down into Egypt; dwell in the land which I shall tell thee of" was a powerful test of Isaac's faith. If Isaac obeyed he would be totally dependent upon God to take care of him. Furthermore, if Isaac obeyed, God promised "I will be with thee, and will bless thee; for unto thy seed, I will give all these countries, and I will perform the oath which I sware unto Abraham thy father."

Verse 4-5

"And I will make thy seed to multiply as the stars of heaven, and will give unto thy seed all these countries; and in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; Because that Abraham obeyed my voice, and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws."

For Isaac's encouragement, the various promises of the Abrahamic covenant are repeated, renewed, and confirmed. Twenty years before Isaac was born, God had made a similar statement to his father Abraham promising "to multiply thy seed as the stars of heaven." No doubt Isaac had heard Abraham talk about those words but he now hears it personally from the Lord. It's good to know God's promises and hear others talk about the Lord but it is sure a blessing when the Lord speaks to you personally. God is promising Isaac that He will make his descendants as the "stars of heaven" and that "all the nations of the earth" will "be blessed" through his lineage.

Why is God doing this through Abraham and now Isaac? The answer is summed up in the five "my's" of this verse. "My voice" is God's communication with Abraham. "My charge" refers to the things God expected Abraham to do. "My commandments" are particular orders given to Abraham from the Lord. "My statutes" refer to permanent orders. "My laws" refer to the great doctrines of moral obligations.

"Because that Abraham obeyed my voice, and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws." This doesn't mean that Abraham was a perfect man but rather that he obeyed God's call and acted in a faithful manner regarding the terms and conditions placed upon him by the Lord. Abraham kept God's "commandments" and His ordinances and lived by God's "law" or moral obligations. God is encouraging Isaac to be like Abraham at his best.

Verse 12-13

"Then Isaac sowed in that land, and received in the same year an hundredfold: and the LORD blessed him. And the man waxed great, and went forward, and grew until he became very great:"

According to Genesis 26:6, "*Isaac dwelt in Gerar.*" "*Dwelt*" means "to stay or settle down." The Lord had told him to "sojourn" which means "to dwell temporarily" (verse 3). One cannot settle down where God has only told him to "sojourn" without being tempted to sin. Isaac immediately got into trouble as he went to Abimelech, king of the Philistines. He repeated the same mistake his father did years earlier and Isaac lied about his wife and told Abimelech she was his sister (Genesis 26:7-11).

Isaac "sowed in that land, and received in the same year an hundredfold: and the LORD blessed him." Isaac had grain for his family and grain to sell. He "waxed great" and "went forward." What great blessings for a man that was growing in

faith. How is it possible for God to bless a person who is out of fellowship with Him? God had permitted Isaac to go to "Gerar" to be tested. Even when Isaac's faith was weak and he failed the test, God promised to bless him. God often brings His children back to Himself by showering unexpected and undeserved goodness (Romans 2:4; 9:23).

As we think about Isaac, let's be careful not to confuse "blessings" with God's presence. They are not the same thing. God promised Isaac, "I will be with thee..." (verse 3). The things God gave Isaac were certainly evidence of God's goodness and kindness to Isaac, but it is possible for a man to become "very great" and have many possessions and yet not have the full joy of the Lord's presence. Isaac was such a man at this stage in his life. Nevertheless, God had promised to bless him, and He did.

Conclusion

The Bible gives us much more information about Isaac than Ishmael. That information could easily cause us to think that Ishmael was the bad boy and Isaac was the good boy. It is easy for us to categorize people and situations with the little information we have. The facts are, both were sons of Abraham and both were blessed by the Lord.

What about you? Are you an Ishmael or an Isaac? Are you a product of the works of your own or of God's miraculous grace? Either way, the good news is that God is a God of grace and can bless your life. It's good to know that God loves us, forgives us, and blesses us, no matter which side of the tracks we come from.

Amen.