

Hagar and Ishmael Are Sent Away

21: 8-21

DIG: From Sarah's perspective, why must Hagar and Ishmael be sent away? From God's perspective? How is Abraham's distress due to past mistakes? How did God use human emotions to further His plan? How did Elohim help Ishmael, even though he was not the son that God had promised Avraham?

REFLECT: Who, like Hagar or Ishmael, is the one with whom you don't get along? How are you handling the discord? What can you do to change the situation? Is there something or someone you need to separate yourself from? Like Hagar, where do you need God's comforting presence in your life?

Isaac had brought so much joy to Abraham and Sarah. It seemed the laughter that had filled their household would go on forever. The child grew and was weaned, and on the day Isaac was weaned Avraham held a great feast (21:8). The weaning was regarded as a joyous occasion, as we find with Samuel, who on being weaned was taken by his mother to the Tabernacle at Shiloh. Children were weaned between the ages of two or three in those days. But in the midst of the laughter, apparently, Hagar and Ishmael were almost forgotten. By this time Ishmael was in his mid teens, probably around sixteen years old (16:15-16). One person's cause for joy can be another's cause for resentment.

Anger welled up in Ishmael as he saw Isaac become the center of attention. But Sarah saw that the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Avraham was mocking Isaac (21:9). The animosity of Hagar toward Sarah had been instilled in Ishmael toward Isaac. The rabbis teach that Sarah assumed that Ishmael's mocking was the echo of what he had heard from his mother. The Hebrew word for Isaac or laughter, *yitzchak*, and the Hebrew word for mocking, *metzachek*, have the same root. Literally, it means Ishmael was *isaacing Isaac*. He was not playing with Isaac as some have suggested. In the B'rit Chadashah, Rabbi Sha'ul says Ishmael persecuted him, or pursued him with hostility (Galatians 4:28-31). Children often do this to each other. The problem here was that Ishmael, who was around sixteen years old, was mocking Isaac, who was two to three years old. *Metzachek* is found several times in Genesis where it is used in the negative sense of ridicule (19:14, 39:14 and 17). It is interesting that Ishmael's name is absent from this entire section. He is referred to as the son, his son, or the boy, but never Ishmael. It is as if he was not even there, and as far as being the son of promise, he was absent from the mind of God.

In a jealous fit, **Sarah** demanded that **Abraham** get rid of, or drive out, that slave woman and her son. Her concern was one of inheritance. The Code of Hammurabi said that the son of a slave woman had a legal claim on the father's inheritance. But even knowing that, **Sarah** said that **Hagar** and **Ishmael** had to go, for that slave woman's son will never share in the inheritance with my son **Isaac** (21:10). This same verb, *garas*, is used to describe **Adam** being driven out of the Garden (3:24), and **Cain** being driven out of the presence of **ADONAI** (4:14). **Sarah** couldn't even bear to call **Hagar** by name. She just referred to her as that slave woman. But most importantly, she didn't want **Ishmael** to have any part of the spiritual inheritance that was rightfully **Isaac's**. The whole situation was a tangled web of jealousy, anger and malice that bore bad fruit.

Abraham was a kind and generous man; however, this matter distressed **Abraham** greatly because it concerned his son **Ishmael** (21:11). But, **Elohim**, the God of righteousness, made it clear to **Abraham** that He was not going to accept **Ishmael** as the son of promise. It was not possible for the two families to live together. In His sixth of seven appearances to **Avraham** (12:1-7, 13:14-17, 15:1-21, 17:1-21, 18:1-33, here and 22:1-18), **God** said: Do not be distressed about the boy and your maidservant (21:12a). In every age **God's** message to His people has been: Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in **God** (John 14:1). He said further: Listen to whatever **Sarah** tells you, because it is through **Isaac** that your offspring will be reckoned (21:12b). Without a doubt **Ishmael's** presence in the home would have made it extremely difficult to fulfill **God's** purposes for **Isaac**. There could be no doubt about it, **Ishmael** had to go. Discipleship always involves discipline, and discipline is always necessary for spiritual blessing. **God** was taking the tangled threads of **Abraham's** life, weaving them into His own divine pattern, and overriding everything for good. Happy for us if, like **Rabbi Sha'ul**, we can rely on the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of **God** (Romans 11:33)!³⁴³

As **Abraham's** son, **Ishmael** would receive his own special blessings from **God** (17:18), but he would not, and never could have been, the child of promise. After **Sarah's** death, **Avraham** would have six other sons by a new wife, **Keturah** (25:1-2); but like **Ishmael**, none of those could have been the child of promise. Later, **Paul** would quote **Moses** and repeat once again: It is through **Isaac** that your offspring will be reckoned (Romans 9:7-9).³⁴⁴

Muslims teach that it is through **Ishmael** that the promises of **God** are fulfilled. But **Paul** teaches the spiritual lesson that as far as salvation goes, between law and grace, the flesh and the spirit cannot coexist (Galatians 4:21-31). **Paul** argues that those who are born after the flesh, are the spiritual descendants of **Hagar**, great in number but nevertheless under the burden to keep the commandments, and they seek salvation through the impossible task of making sinful flesh keep the Torah perfectly. The Torah speaks of **God's** Covenant with **Moses**, a conditional covenant, given on Mount Sinai in Arabia where **Ishmael** lived.

Those who are to share in **God's** heavenly promises, centered in Jerusalem, are children of faith, like **Isaac**. The Torah can never give life; but **God's** promise, received by faith, gives eternal life (see my commentary on **The Life of Christ Ms - The Eternal Security of the Believer**). These children of faith are not in bondage to **Elohim's** covenant with Moses, whose terms are impossible to obey. But they are under **God's** covenant with **Abraham**, given unconditionally and appropriated solely by faith in the promises. Those who live by faith are *free*, like **Sarah**. However, those who live by the flesh are *slaves*, like **Hagar**.³⁴⁵ Therefore, **they** cannot coexist; when **Isaac** (Hebrew: **Yitz'chak**) showed up, Ishmael had to go!

But because Ishmael was **Abraham's son**, **Elohim** would make him into a nation also. **Abraham** need not worry that **Hagar** and Ishmael would die in the desert. **God** said: **I will make the son of the maidservant into a nation also because he is your offspring (21:13)**. Ishmael will benefit from the blessing aspect of **God's** covenant with **Abraham**, and he showed no signs of rebellion.

As painful as it was to do, **Abraham** did not procrastinate. **Early the next morning he took some food and a skin of water and gave them to Hagar**. It was an ancient Egyptian custom for the women to carry burdens on their shoulders, so **he set the food and the skin of water on her shoulders and then sent her off with her son (21:14a)**. In view of **Abraham's** wealth, this wasn't very much to send off with **them**. But **Abraham** had faith that **God** would take care of them. **He** knew that no matter how much **he** gave them, it would not be enough; but with **God**, **they** would not lack. Quite possibly, **he** knew it would be for their own good if **they** would quickly learn they must depend on **God**, and no longer on **Abraham**, to supply their needs. **Avraham** loved that **boy** and I don't think **he** ever saw **him** again. Ishmael was his **son** and it was heartbreaking for **Abraham** to have to give **him** up. For about sixteen years **he** had been the joy of his life. But **Hagar** went on her way with Ishmael and **wandered in the desert of Beersheba (21:14b)**. The food and the skin of water was no doubt enough to enable them to reach another settlement, had **they** not become lost.³⁴⁶

Archaeology has revealed that there were numerous settlements at this time in the vicinity of what would later become known as **Beersheba**, and it seems that **Hagar** and Ishmael set out in this direction. However, **they** lost their way. After wandering for some time, **when the water in the skin was gone, she put her son under one of the bushes** because Ishmael was at the point of death **(21:15)**. **He** had probably given most of the water to **his** mother. Finally, **he** fell down. Unable to continue, **Hagar** went off and sat down nearby, about a bow shot away, for she thought to herself: **I cannot watch my son die. And as she sat there nearby, she began to pray and sob (21:16)**. **God** brought **them** to the point where **they** could no longer continue in **their** own strength. **They**, like **Abraham**, would need to learn to trust **Him**.

Then **God** heard Ishmael crying and the **Angel of God**, *the preincarnate Christ*, called to Hagar from heaven. This is the second time that the preincarnate **Christ** had rescued Hagar. Earlier, when she ran out into the desert because of her mistreatment at the hand of Sarai, He found Hagar near a spring in the desert (16:7a). There, He was called the **Angel of the Lord**, *the redeemer*, because she was still under the roof and protection of Abraham. Here, He is called the **Angel of God**, because Hagar was then a foreigner to the covenant of promise (Ephesians 2:12). But He is the **God** of all mankind, and He graciously said to her, "What is the matter, Hagar? Do not be afraid; **God** has heard the boy crying as he lies there" (21:17). Then **God** opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. So she went and filled the skin with water and gave the boy a drink (21:19).

He said: **Lift the boy up and take him by the hand, for I will make him into a great nation** (21:18). And **God** would fulfill His promise, because He was with the boy as he grew up (21:20a). In the book of Acts it is written that **ADONAI** was with Joseph (Acts 7:9) and Jesus (Acts 10:38). We often encourage each other with the words of **Messiah**: **And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age** (Matthew 28:20). How wonderful to know **God's** acceptance through **Christ** and His presence is **with us always**. Here we read the very same presence is with Ishmael. **God** must have loved him very much. He heard his cry when he was laying under the bushes and performed a miracle for his mother in order to take care of him, just as **Elohim** did with **Abraham**, David and others after His own heart. He was with Ishmael. **God** never says anything bad about Ishmael.

Since there was no farming, Ishmael provided for himself and his mother by becoming an archer as they lived in the desert (21:20b).

*The Muslims teach that **Abraham** took Ishmael and **Hagar** and made a new settlement in Mecca, called **Paran**, because of a divine instruction given to **Abraham** as a part of **God's** plan. They teach that **Hagar** ran around seven times between two hills, **Sofa** and **Marwa**, looking for water; this became then an Islamic ritual for the annual Pilgrimage in Mecca by millions of Muslims from all over the world. The **well of water** (21:19) is still present, now called **Zamzam**. They also teach that both **Abraham** and **Ishmael** later built the holy stone **Ka'bah** in Mecca. The supposed spot where **Abraham** used to perform prayers near the **Ka'bah** is still present, now called **Maqom Ibrahim**, or the **Station of Abraham**. Therefore, during the day of Pilgrimage, Pilgrims in Mecca and Muslims all over the world commemorate the supposed offering of **Abraham** and **Ishmael** by slaughtering cattle.³⁴⁸*

While he was living in the **Desert of Paran**, a desert region in what is now the Sinai Peninsula, his mother got a wife for him from Egypt, **the idolatrous land of her upbringing** (21:21). She became so identified with this region that Paul would say of her, "Now Hagar stands for **Mount Sinai** in Arabia" (Galatians 4:25). Obtaining a wife for a

son is still the common practice in the Near East. **Genesis 10** tells us that the Egyptians were descendants of Ham, who were anti-Semitic, which only adds to the antagonism that was already there. Here, Ishmael drops out of the picture until we learn of his death after bearing twelve sons (**25:12-18**). But the **great nation** that **God** had promised had begun.

In a sense, Ishmael was a symbol of **Abraham's** and **Sarah's** lack of faith. **God** knew that they should have faithfully waited for the promised **son**. However, when Ishmael was conceived, **God** did not angrily reject **him** and toss **him** aside. Instead, **God** loved **the boy** and agreed to bless **him**. When our frail faith results in costly mistakes, **God** can turn our penitent regret into blessing for **His** own purposes.³⁴⁷