

Genesis 21-23 Chapter Study

INTRODUCTION

We come now to the end of Abraham's story in Genesis.

The long anticipated son through Sarah is about to be born and the story will pass to him.

CHAPTER 21

1And the Lord visited Sarah as He had said, and the Lord did for Sarah as He had spoken. 2For Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the set time of which God had spoken to him.

The utter faithfulness of God shines forth!

He had said Sarah would have a son, and though some 30 years have passed and she is well passed the age at which she could have children, she conceived and gave birth to a baby boy!

Take careful note of the emphasis the author places on the promise of God here.

1And the Lord visited Sarah as He had said, and the Lord did for Sarah as He had spoken. 2For Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the set time of which God had spoken to him.

When God speaks – it's as good as done! His spoken Word is the sure guarantee of His performance.

Friends – that's why this book, which carries to us the Word and words of God, is a treasure chest.

This is nothing less than gold because it contains the promises of God to you and I.

And they are as good as done!

Like Abraham and Sarah, the only thing for us to do is to live in the light of them and faithfully wait for them to be manifest in our lives.

What God has spoken – HE WILL DO!

Without exception & without concern for the obstacles or apparent difficulties their fulfillment will have to overcome.

3And Abraham called the name of his son who was born to him—whom Sarah bore to him—Isaac.

Which means "Laughter."

4Then Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. 5Now Abraham was one hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. 6And Sarah said, "God has made me laugh, and all who hear will laugh with me." 7She also said, "Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? For I have borne him a son in his old age."

Sarah's mocking laughter that rose within her when God had appeared to Abraham in ch. 18 and told him that Sarah would conceive within the year, has turned into the laughter of joy.

We can just picture Sarah as she made her way through their camp as her belly swelled over the months of her pregnancy.

It's not hard to imagine Abraham patting her and the two smiling at each other and breaking out in huge grins.

And all throughout the labor and delivery, though there was the attendant pain, there was also the wonder and joy at the miracle that was taking place.

And then when they saw the little boy for the first time, the joy must have been enough to fairly split them in two!

Since Isaac will be the son whom the promise of God to Abraham will flow to, Abraham is diligent to circumcise him on the 8th day as the Lord had instructed him.

8So the child grew and was weaned. And Abraham made a great feast on the same day that Isaac was weaned.

While we tend to wean children at about a year, some cultures take far longer to wean their children.

Some Inuit tribes don't wean their children till they are adolescents, say 11 to 13 years old!

Some African tribes don't wean till 8 or 9.

The ancient middle eastern cultures weaned children between 3 and 5 years of age, so Isaac was probably about 3 when he was weaned.

That makes his older half-brother Ishmael, the son of Abraham and Hagar, about 17.

When Isaac was weaned and moved to solid food, Abraham threw a party as this would mark a new phase of Isaac's life.

He would now start moving out from under his mother's skirts into the role of being a man.

The focus of attention at this feast would of course be the little boy who would sit with the men for the first time.

9And Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, scoffing. 10Therefore she said to Abraham, "Cast out this bondwoman and her son; for the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son, namely with Isaac." 11And the matter was very displeasing in Abraham's sight because of his son.

Up to this point, Ishmael's been his dad's darling!

Oh sure, the arrival of Isaac had diverted a good portion of the attention from him but Isaac's been in the company of the women of the community up till now.

Whenever Abraham went to the fields, it was Ishmael who'd been with him.

From this point on, Isaac will be trucking along with them and Ishmael can see the writing on the wall – Pop's attention and affection is now going to be given to this newcomer.

Isaac is competition – and Ishmael can't help but show his disdain for his little half-brother.

Sarah sees Ishmael's mocking and the meanness in his derision and realizes that real trouble is brewing.

Ishmael's countenance isn't simply that of a child who is making fun – there's genuine hatred there – Sarah can see disaster looming and tells Abraham something drastic has to be done.

But Abraham is devastated at the thought of banishing Ishmael! This is his firstborn son!

And it seems at first he rejected Sarah's counsel.

12But God said to Abraham, "Do not let it be displeasing in your sight because of the lad or because of your bondwoman. Whatever Sarah has said to you, listen to her voice; for in Isaac your seed shall be called. 13Yet I will also make a nation of the son of the bondwoman, because he is your seed."

God told Abraham to heed his wife's counsel; she was right.

Ishmael had to be banished because he was not to partake of the promise of God to Abraham.

He was not to be an heir of all that God had bestowed on him.

God had a separate promise for Ishmael – but it was not a part of the promise God had made to Abraham and his descendants through Isaac.

There are two quick insights it would profit us to mark here before we move on.

God said to Abraham – "Listen to your wife's voice," and "In Isaac your seed shall be called."

Listen to your wife's voice – In the creation, the wife was made for the man to be his companion and helper. To complete him!

A vital part of this help is her counsel.

While the husband is the head of the wife and so responsible for the final decisions of the marriage and home, God intends the husband to listen to his wife and heed her counsel as he considers the options and makes that decision.

Women often see things differently and consider factors a man will miss in his analysis.

The diligent husband will ask his wife for her thoughts and counsel and ask appropriate questions that will help reveal her heart.

His careful consideration of her counsel will go a long way in affirming her sense of security in their relationship and will make her submission to him that much more ready and willing.

And when a wife's counsel stands in direct contradiction to the course her husband would take, that's when HE needs to take a good, hard look at himself and his motives.

That's what happened with Abraham.

Sarah said to banish Ishmael and his mother Hagar, and Abraham thought that was simply ridiculous!

But God told him to heed his wife – Abraham was wrong and she was right!

Whenever a husband and wife are BOTH seeking the Lord and yet they vary so widely in their counsel – the husband needs to be extra careful to make sure he's really hearing from God.

Second – God's word here makes it clear that the promise originally given to Abraham in ch., 12 and renewed time and again is to flow to whom – Isaac or Ishmael?

Okay – settle this – because this question is the one that has our world in such turmoil today.

The Muslims say that God's promise went to Ishmael!!!!!!!!!!!!!!
The scoffing of Ishmael toward Isaac has never ended!
The conflict and tension between Isaac's seed and Ishmael's seed is being played out in our papers today.
The bus that was blown up yesterday by Palestinian terrorists in Haifa, killing 15, is nothing more nor less than another blow in the age old conflict between these two sons of Abraham.
And don't be fooled – the so called Peace talks in which Israel gives up land in exchange for the promise of peace is nothing but a ruse in which to secure the eventual eradication of the entire State of Israel.
The sons of Ishmael will not be content, by their own admission, until they've driven the sons of Isaac into the sea.

14So Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water; and putting it on her shoulder, he gave it and the boy to Hagar, and sent her away. Then she departed and wandered in the Wilderness of Beersheba.

This was a step of hard obedience on Abraham's part and an act of real faith!
Contrast Abraham's actions with those of Lot when the day came for the destruction of Sodom.

When did Abraham rise? V. 14 – early in the morning.

When did Lot leave Sodom? Late; so late in fact that the angels had to take him by the hand and drag him out.

Both men were called on to take a step of hard obedience to the Lord and in themselves there was a reluctance.

Lot's reluctance manifested itself in delayed obedience.

Abraham's reluctance was put aside in favor of quick obedience.

Lot's eyes were fixed on what he was losing. Abraham's eyes were fixed on the Lord and his promise to take care of Ishmael.

That's why he only gave Hagar and the young man some bread and water rather than a bunch of wealth.

At first glance, Abraham's provisions seem miserly and cruel.

But on reflection, we realize they're evidence of his faith in the Lord who'd promised to make of Ishmael a mighty nation, all because he was Abraham's son.

Abraham was a man who knew first-hand what it meant to be blessed by the Lord.

He knew that when God promises to do a thing, He will do it.

So Abraham didn't need to give them anything other than the means of basic survival to get them from there to the nearest village or Bedouin camp.

He couldn't really divide up his wealth and give some to Ishmael because God had just affirmed that Isaac was the heir to it all.

The Apostle Paul bases an important spiritual lesson on this whole story.

In Galatians 4 he says that Ishmael and Isaac are more than merely the sons of Abraham.

They represent the two modes of life the people of God can live in – the flesh or the Spirit.

22For it is written that Abraham had two sons: the one by a bondwoman, {Sarah's Egyptian handmaid, Hagar} the other by a freewoman [Sarah]. 23But he who was

of the bondwoman [Ishmael] was born according to the flesh, and he of the freewoman through promise, 24which things are symbolic.

Paul is making it clear that while the events of Genesis are historical, they also stand as eternal principles for God's people.

Ishmael was the fruit of Abraham and Sarah's attempt to live for the Lord in the power of their own flesh.

They knew God had promised them a son but when the fulfillment of the promise was delayed, rather than waiting on God, they set about to make it happen on their own and used the surrogate of Sarah's maid, Hagar.

Isaac was the son of the promise and was a miracle, brought about by God's power, working through their simple obedience.

For these [the two sons of Abraham] are the two covenants: the one from Mount Sinai which gives birth to bondage, which is Hagar—25for this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia, and corresponds to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children—26but the Jerusalem above is free, which is the mother of us all.

Paul says that Ishmael is symbolic of those who try to live for God by the old covenant of the law.

They strive through the power of the flesh to produce the fruit of a righteous life. But if they do, all it does it produce self righteousness, not genuine holiness.

Isaac is symbolic of those who have been born again by the Spirit of God and being indwelt by the Spirit possess the power to walk obediently before the Lord.

It is on those who walk by the Spirit, not the flesh, who enjoy the privilege of being the children and heirs of God.

But this privilege stirs up jealousy in those who are walking in the flesh, just as it stirred up envy in Ishmael toward Isaac.

28Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are children of promise. 29But, as he who was born according to the flesh then persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, even so it is now. 30Nevertheless what does the Scripture say? "Cast out the bondwoman and her son, for the son of the bondwoman shall not be heir with the son of the freewoman." 31So then, brethren, we are not children of the bondwoman but of the free.

Paul says that Abraham's banishment of Hagar and Ishmael is more than an historical event – it's part of God's plan to teach us just how radically we must deal with the flesh and with any thought that we can find a place of acceptance before God on the basis of the Law or our own strength.

Our place and acceptance before the Lord is solely and only the result of His doing, His faithfulness.

Just as Abraham rose early and promptly sent them away so we need to exercise an attitude of ruthlessness in dealing with our flesh!

Don't pamper it, don't enrich it, don't invest in it.

Give it bread and water and then cut it lose. God will take care of it His way.

Our focus must be to walk in the Spirit.

When Hagar and Ishmael went out, they wandered in the Wilderness of Beersheba.

This is in the region of southern Israel, and is wild desert.
It's rather interesting that instead of being purposeful in their direction, they
"wandered."

It would not have been at all difficult for Hagar to pick a direction and journey
to a village or another Bedouin camp.

It seems her hopes of living a comfortable life in the midst of prosperity have
been dashed so in despair she just wanders aimlessly in the desert.

15And the water in the skin was used up, and she placed the boy under one of the
shrubs. **16**Then she went and sat down across from him at a distance of about a
bowshot; for she said to herself, "Let me not see the death of the boy." So she sat
opposite him, and lifted her voice and wept.

17And God heard the voice of the lad. Then the angel of God called to Hagar out of
heaven, and said to her, "What ails you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heard the
voice of the lad where he is. **18**Arise, lift up the lad and hold him with your hand,
for I will make him a great nation." **19**Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a
well of water. And she went and filled the skin with water, and gave the lad a drink.

When the water ran out, Hagar found a bit of shade for Ishmael, set him there, then
went off a distance and laid down to die.

Hagar then wept bitter tears of resignation – this was it, the end!

But whereas she just wept, Ishmael prayed and God heard him.

Hagar's eyes were opened to see a well she'd missed.

She filled the empty water-skin and brought some of it to Ishmael who was by
then too weak to move.

God's promise to make of Ishmael a great nation is renewed to her.

God had already spoken this promise to her some 18 years before when she
was pregnant with Ishmael. [Gen. 16]

But the hardships she's endured have eclipsed God's promise and she no longer
believes them.

God reminds here that the fulfillment of His promises are not contingent upon
our circumstances.

Even when it seems all is hopeless and all that is left is to die under the desert
sun – even then, God will come and make good on ALL HIS WORD.

He will make wells of water to appear in the middle of that parched desert.

He can fill empty water skins.

He can even raise the dead back to life!

20So God was with the lad; and he grew and dwelt in the wilderness, and became an
archer. **21**He dwelt in the Wilderness of Paran; and his mother took a wife for him
from the land of Egypt.

And so begins the Arabic people.

22And it came to pass at that time that Abimelech and Phicol [figh-kawl • "mighty"]

Like the title "Abimelech," "Phicol" was not this man's proper name but his title
or rank as the military commander of the Philistines.

22And it came to pass at that time that Abimelech and Phicol the commander of his
army, spoke to Abraham, saying, "God is with you in all that you do. **23**Now
therefore, swear to me by God that you will not deal falsely with me, with my
offspring, or with my posterity; but that according to the kindness that I have done

to you, you will do to me and to the land in which you have dwelt.” 24And Abraham said, “I will swear.”

As I mentioned last week, at this period of history when most nations were really just city-states, forging military, economic, and political alliances was the means of achieving peace and stability.

Rulers were constantly on the lookout for two things – threats and allies.

Who presented a danger and who might I ally myself with to increase my power and thus forestall an invasion?

Abraham lived in Abimelech’s immediate area and when Abimelech saw that everything Abraham did profited, he realized the favor of God on him and knew he would make a great ally. After all - what’s better than divine favor?

25Then Abraham rebuked Abimelech because of a well of water which Abimelech’s servants had seized. 26And Abimelech said, “I do not know who has done this thing; you did not tell me, nor had I heard of it until today.” 27So Abraham took sheep and oxen and gave them to Abimelech, and the two of them made a covenant. 28And Abraham set seven ewe lambs of the flock by themselves. 29Then Abimelech asked Abraham, “What is the meaning of these seven ewe lambs which you have set by themselves?” 30And he said, “You will take these seven ewe lambs from my hand, that they may be my witness that I have dug this well.” 31Therefore he called that place Beersheba, because the two of them swore an oath there.

When Abimelech offered this alliance to Abraham, Abe used the offer as a chance to clear up something.

There’d been a dispute some time before over a well Abraham’s servants had dug.

Abimelech’s men had come and commandeered it.

Abimelech says he knows nothing about it and asks why Abraham hadn’t brought it up when it happened?

Abraham probably hadn’t said anything because of his previous encounter with Abimelech in which he’d blown it badly, saying that Sarah was his sister and causing a plague to fall on Abimelech’s palace.

In that encounter, even though Abraham had been in the wrong, Abimelech had compensated him with livestock.

Now, when Abimelech is in the wrong, Abraham takes advantage of the situation to return the payment, at least in part.

He provides some animals for the covenant treaty, and he and Abimelech “cut a covenant” by walking through the animal pieces together.

Once they cut the covenant, Abraham went through a ritual of taking 7 more sheep and setting them off to the side.

When Abimelech asked what he was doing, Abraham told him this was an additional gift to settle any future claims Abimelech or his servants might make to another well Abraham had dug.

This one was called Beersheba – Well of the oath.

The 7 ewe lambs were like receipts that Abimelech would hold as evidence that the well of Beersheba belonged to Abraham.

The region of Beersheba is on the very edge of the desert and water is extremely scarce.

This well was a treasure and took much hard labor to dig.
Abraham wanted to make sure he wouldn't lose control of it to the Philistines.

32 Thus they made a covenant at Beersheba. So Abimelech rose with Phichol, the commander of his army, and they returned to the land of the Philistines. 33 Then Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beersheba, and there called on the name of the Lord, the Everlasting God. 34 And Abraham stayed in the land of the Philistines many days.

Planting the tree was evidence of his intent to stay there and to make Beersheba one of the places his family would return again and again.

There is precious little shade in this desert region so the tree would grow and over the years provide shade for the camp.

So planting this tree was an act of faith, as it would take many years for the tree to grow into a shade tree.

CHAPTER 22

1 Now it came to pass after these things that God tested Abraham, and said to him, "Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am."

Several years have passed between chapters 21 & 22 and Isaac has now grown to be a young man.

Then God comes to Abraham with a test – not a test to prove anything to God for God knows all things, including our future; He knows the end from the beginning.

This test was not for God's sake, but for Abraham's.

God knew that Abraham's faith was true – Abraham needed to know it as well.

This is an important lesson for us to learn.

God knows us better than we know ourselves.

He knows our breaking point and will never take us past it.

1 Corinthians 10:13 gives us this promise -

No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it.

We might well ask, if God has such control over temptation and the trials we endure, then why would He allow us to go through them at all?

Because those trials and temptations make clear to us just how God is answering our prayers to make us more like Him.

He wants our faith to be more than merely intellectual; it needs to be experiential!

We already examined these verses in depth on a Sunday morning some weeks ago in a message titled – "The Sacrifice of Worship." [Get it if not here]

Tonight – let me just read the text. And remember as I do the Rule of first use; that the first time we encounter something in scripture sets the pace and tone for that thing through the rest of the Bible.

It's with special interest then that we notice this is the first time a couple very important words are used.

2 Then He said, "Take now your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to

the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.”

This is the first time the word “love” is used in scripture – and what kind of love does it describe?

And what does God tell Abraham to do with his beloved son?

Was Isaac Abraham’s only son?

Why did God direct them to a special mountain in the region of Moriah?

And why would God tell Abraham to offer a human sacrifice since this is apparently contradictory to all morality?

3So Abraham rose early in the morning and saddled his donkey,

Again, contrast Abraham’s quick obedience to Lot’s reluctance in leaving Sodom.

and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son; and he split the wood for the burnt offering, and arose and went to the place of which God had told him.

4Then on the third day Abraham lifted his eyes and saw the place afar off. 5And Abraham said to his young men, “Stay here with the donkey; the lad and I will go yonder and worship, and we will come back to you.”

This is the first time the word “worship” is used in scripture.

6So Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it on Isaac his son; and he took the fire in his hand, and a knife, and the two of them went together. 7But Isaac spoke to Abraham his father and said, “My father!” And he said, “Here I am, my son.” Then he said, “Look, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?” 8And Abraham said, “My son, God will provide for Himself the lamb for a burnt offering.” So the two of them went together. 9Then they came to the place of which God had told him. And Abraham built an altar there and placed the wood in order; and he bound Isaac his son and laid him on the altar, upon the wood. 10And Abraham stretched out his hand and took the knife to slay his son. 11But the Angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said, “Abraham, Abraham!” So he said, “Here I am.” 12And He said, “Do not lay your hand on the lad, or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me.” 13Then Abraham lifted his eyes and looked, and there behind him was a ram caught in a thicket by its horns. So Abraham went and took the ram, and offered it up for a burnt offering instead of his son. 14And Abraham called the name of the place, The-Lord-Will-Provide; as it is said to this day, “In the Mount of the Lord it shall be provided.”

All of this is a marvelous picture of God the Father offering His beloved only begotten Son on the very same hill some 2000 years later when Jesus went to the Cross.

That’s right! When Abraham said, “In the Mount of the Lord it shall be provided,” he was speaking of that very site and that’s why God directed them there.

You see, this hill in Moriah is the same hill David would later buy from Arunah, and upon which his son Solomon would erect the temple.

Calvary, or Golgotha as it’s called in the NT is the same hill.

This is a marvelous picture and holds some powerful lessons for us – so as I said, if you weren’t here on the Sunday we covered it – get the tape/CD “The Sacrifice of Worship.”

15Then the Angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time out of heaven, 16and

said: “By Myself I have sworn, says the Lord, because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only son—17blessing I will bless you, and multiplying I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your descendants shall possess the gate of their enemies.

God now gives an expanded guarantee of His blessing on Abraham.

He not only renews the promise but makes a solemn oath based on His own nature that He will perform all that He has said he would for Abraham and his descendants.

This promise is made sure and sealed in light of Abraham’s radical obedience and faith in the Lord.

This is an important thing to realize – that God’s blessing will come upon Abraham’s descendants through Isaac till the end of time all because of Abraham’s faith and response to God!

God made this promise to Abraham – and will keep fulfilling it for all eternity.

When God says that Abraham’s descendants will possess the gates of their enemies, it means that they will exercise leadership and control, even over their enemies.

What’s kind of crazy is that even when the Jewish people have been persecuted and the fires of anti-Semitism have been burning hot, they continue to experience the blessing of God in ways that ensure they maintain a level of influence and control that is way beyond their numbers or social status.

In medieval Europe and during the Inquisition, the Jews were the financiers and bankers of most of the economies of Europe.

History is replete with story after story of how the influence of the Jewish people has been way beyond their numbers and any accounting of man.

Look at today.

The influence of Jewish people today in fields like banking, diamonds, scientific research and discovery, is overwhelming!

And the little State of Israel is the thorniest issue of international politics!

Truly, they have possessed the gate of their enemies, and when Messiah comes again, we’ll see this promised fulfilled in even more dramatic ways.

18In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice.”

This is God’s promise that the Messiah will be through his descendants by Isaac.

19So Abraham returned to his young men, and they rose and went together to Beersheba; and Abraham dwelt at Beersheba.

Who returned? Abraham! Whose missing – whose not mentioned? Isaac! Why? We’ll see why next week. It’s another powerful image that helps us see God intends this whole thing to be a picture of Christ.

20Now it came to pass after these things that it was told Abraham, saying, “Indeed Milcah also has borne children to your brother Nahor: 21Huz his firstborn, Buz his brother, Kemuel the father of Aram, 22Chesed, Hazo, Pildash, Jidlaph, and Bethuel.” 23And Bethuel begot Rebekah. These eight Milcah bore to Nahor, Abraham’s brother. 24His concubine, whose name was Reumah, also bore Tebah, Gaham, Thahash, and Maachah.

These relatives of Abraham are mentioned at this point as a set up for a later part of the story.