

## Prayers

### Opening prayer

Thank You, Jesus, for the great joy of finding truth within Your Word, the Bible. We thank You and praise You for making Your will known to us in written form, and we ask for the wisdom to receive what it says and act on it. Give us a heart to read it all, even though we find some of it difficult to understand, so that we may benefit from its teaching throughout our lives. Bless us as we read what You have to say to us each day we pray: AMEN

### Prayer Suggestions

Consider praying under these four headings, and pray as you feel led. The ideas below may help.

**1. For yourself**

*Pray in thanksgiving for the life you have and the blessings you have received*

**2. For your friends and family**

*Thank God for your family and friends, and ask the Lord to bless them today, and every day*

**3. For the church and its work**

*Praise the Lord for the wonderful work being done by God's people throughout the world, and also in your local church*

**4. For your neighbourhood, your country and the world (News)**

*Give thanks to God for the benefits of living where you are, and give Him thanks for all His earthly provision*

### Meditation

You have taken us as we are, Lord God,  
And You have challenged us and changed us.  
You have lifted us out of life's troubled depths,  
And delivered us onto the firm ground of Faith.  
You have listened to the complaints we've made  
And directed us back to righteousness and truth.  
You have seen the sins we struggle to confess,  
And dealt with them in power, so we may be saved.  
You have heard our despairing cries for help,  
And fought our enemies, for our liberation.  
You have felt the limits of human frailty,  
And touched our wounds, and healed us.  
Yours, O Lord, is the power and the Glory!

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## Bible Study

### Bible passage – Genesis 21: 1-8

<sup>1</sup> Then the LORD helped Sarah as He had said, and did for her what He had promised. <sup>2</sup> Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son when he was old, and he was born at the time God had said. <sup>3</sup> Abraham gave the name Isaac to the son Sarah bore him.

<sup>4</sup> When he was eight days old Abraham circumcised his son Isaac, as God had commanded him; <sup>5</sup> and Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born.

<sup>6</sup> Then Sarah said,

‘God has made me laugh aloud, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me!

<sup>7</sup> Moreover, who would ever have said to Abraham that Sarah would breast feed children? Yet now I have borne him a son in his old age!’

<sup>8</sup> The child grew and was weaned; and on that same day, his father Abraham held a great feast.

## Review

We have finally arrived at the first point in the Bible when the Lord fulfils His miraculous promise of blessing made to Abraham and Sarah. The Covenant promise was that they would have a son who would bear the inheritance of the Lord’s Covenant with His people, and through him the Covenant would be passed on to countless future generations. This is the central theme of scripture from Genesis 12 through to our passage today, which describes how it gloriously and miraculously comes true. The journey that Abraham and Sarah travelled in this time was primarily a journey of faith, even though it included travelling in and through the Promised Land of Canaan. It was also a unique spiritual journey, because no-one had travelled it before. They were true pioneers of faith, exploring not just the land of Canaan, but what it meant to trust the Lord despite their failings. Along the way, they learned a great deal about themselves, the world in which they lived, and the Lord who had chosen them as His own.

Abraham and Sarah are the first people in the Bible who we come to know in depth. As events unfold in their lives, the scriptural record reveals their characters, both in the good times (chs14,18) and the bad (12:10-20; ch16). It also tells us about the wider world in which they lived, including the politics of Mesopotamia (see chapter14) and the city life of those who lived in the Jordan valley (see the story of Sodom, chapters 18,19). Even though these stories are very ancient, we can read them and feel empathically involved with what happened to both Abraham and Sarah; and this is essential if we are to relate to their faith in God. For at the heart of the story of these two servants of the Lord is their specific faith that God would miraculously give them a son even though they were childless, and that through them, God would do His work. It takes great faith to accept a miracle when it happens, and even greater faith to believe in it before it happened, as did Abraham and Sarah! Now that God has fulfilled His promise, we can rejoice with Sarah, even laugh with her (21:6) as she bubbles over with sheer incredulous joy at the birth of her son at the impossible age of 90! This one central and joyous fact is the unique focus of our passage from Genesis today.

The miraculous nature of the birth of Isaac is essential to our understanding of this scripture. Some people have great difficulty believing in the ‘miracles’ recorded in the Bible, and there is ample scope for doubt about a story as ancient as this, particularly when we know so little about the times in which Abraham and Sarah lived. Yet this event has been preserved in writing for us precisely because it stands out from what is normal, and God worked through a miraculous event in order to tell us that only He could have done it. The work of passing on the Covenant from one generation to another was one which could not be thought of as a mere human activity, and the birth of Isaac and his successful weaning (21:8) were a physical demonstration to the world of God’s intent to be involved in human affairs.

The reason why God involves Himself in worldly affairs and performs miracles is because He has a plan for the salvation of the world, and all His miracles point to this conclusion. If we think that the Covenant between God and Abraham is about anything else, then we have misunderstood what the book of Genesis teaches. Throughout Genesis, God is working at a plan of salvation for the whole human race, and His relationship with Abraham and Sarah (a Covenant relationship) based on His constant love and their growing faith is a model for a relationship with God by faith, and it has much to teach us. The birth of Isaac is an amazing milestone in this relationship because it combines the fulfilment of God’s loving promises and the faith of Abraham and Sarah.

## Going Deeper

- Connecting with the previous chapter
- The birth of Isaac
- Sarah laughs!

There is one important feature of this text which we will need to look at carefully; the birth of Isaac is the first birth in the Bible which has clear links with the other major ‘births’ which point the way to the coming of Jesus Christ. This points us towards a better understanding of the purposes of God which are revealed throughout the story of Abraham and Sarah.

## **Connecting with the previous chapter**

Before we go further, we must be acquainted with something about this famous story of the birth of Isaac that has been inadvertently hidden from our eyes. The reason for this is because of the way the chapter headings in the Bible interrupt the flow of the overall story in Genesis (remember, chapter numbers and verses were added to the Bible text for our convenience many hundreds of years after the time of Christ!).

In the verses immediately before our passage (20:17,18) Abraham prayed for king Abimelech after the fiasco in which Sarah had been taken into his harem (Gen 20:2). It records that as Abraham prayed, the Lord 'had stopped anyone in Abimelech's household from bearing children, and now they became fertile again.' Now, if we ignore the chapter heading, the story immediately proceeds to say 'Then the LORD helped Sarah as He had said ... and (she) bore Abraham a son'. If you read these verses together, as indeed they appear in the Hebrew, it looks as though Sarah's pregnancy was associated with her husband's obedience to God in praying for the fertility of King Abimelech's household. God was powerfully at work in Abraham as he spoke prophetically in obedience to the Lord.

## **The birth of Isaac**

The very first sentence of verse 1 does not only link with the previous chapter in this way, it also contains a remarkable word which helps us understand what God was doing throughout the unfolding events. It says that the Lord 'helped' Sarah. The Hebrew word used here is a very significant one in the Bible, because it describes God's intervention in the world in order to achieve His will. You may recognise the word more readily if I remind you of a slightly different translation with which you may be familiar; 'the Lord visited Sarah ...' This expression is not simply an 'old English' word which can be cast aside, because it links with some key Biblical themes. The Old Testament describes how God visits his people by bringing either salvation or judgement. For example, the Lord 'visited' His people Israel when He came to save them from Egypt (Gen 50:24,25; Ex 4:31), and also He promised to 'visit' them for judgement if they disobeyed Him (Gen 20:5; 32:34).

Probably the most famous use of this word comes in the story of Hannah, another barren woman of advancing years in the life of the people of Israel. God 'visited' her so that she might bear a son (the son would be called Samuel – see 1 Sam 2:21)! This second incident in the Bible of a barren woman bearing a child who would be used by God for the salvation of His people should spark our interest, for it begins to look like a pattern. Indeed, the same word was used (translated into Greek) by Mary when she became pregnant with the Son of God, Jesus, and spoke a poem of praise which contains these words (from the Authorised version); 'Blessed be the Lord God of Israel; for He hath visited and redeemed his people'. These words from Luke 1:68 are themselves closely related to Hannah's own psalm of praise (1 Sam 2:1-10), but what should spark our interest is the way that God is described as 'visiting' first Sarah, then Hannah, and then Mary. We should have no doubt that it is a word which signifies God's powerful work for the salvation of humanity!

The intriguing thing about this passage today is that both Abraham and Sarah have their part to play. They appear in this text as equals, each fulfilling their God-given task in the entry of Isaac into the world. Abraham, the man credited with righteousness through faith (15:6), is the one who had to be obedient to what God had told him by both naming the child Isaac (21:3) and also circumcising him (21:4). With faith came the obligations and duties of that faith, and these two commands of God had come to Abraham as part of the formal Covenant promise (17:12,19), and the naming and circumcision would have been carried out at the conclusion of eight days when it became clear that the child who had been born would live. It is an assumption we make today that all children will live, but it was far from true in past generations; it was therefore a wonderful 'birthday party' for Abraham, who was one hundred years old at the time! (21:5)

Sarah, however, had a more prominent part to play. She was the one who bore a child at the age of ninety (Gen 17:17) and whose barrenness was now both overcome and also explained in full. If Sarah and Abraham had been able to have many children (as did Jacob two generations later, for example), we would still have the entire nation of God's people born from him, but not the faith that went before the nation building. God worked through the circumstances of Sarah's barrenness to bring Abraham to a rich faith before the Covenant promises were fulfilled, and this was His plan so that faith could be revealed. Faith was found at the right time in Abraham (15:6); and now, 'at the time God said' (21:2) Sarah bore her son in fruition of the Lord's promises. The two go together.

## **Sarah laughs!**

The laughter of nervous disbelief shown earlier by both Abraham (17:17) and Sarah (18:13) had already turned into faithful expectation, but when Isaac was born, the laughter was of humour and joy. In those days there was always joy at the birth of a child, especially at the birth of a son who had survived the first few difficult days of life and taken to nursing from the mother's breast. In those early days it was 'life or death' for the child; and in Isaac's case, he survived! Laughter and joy are one of God's great gifts, and are too often missing from our praise of God. Sarah had no such qualms!

However, it is not irreverent for us to think that the laughter was possibly pure humour. This is how Sarah herself portrayed her feelings when saying 'who would ever have said to Abraham that Sarah would breast feed children?' If we can imagine a group of elderly ladies chortling with fun at the idea of bearing a child in these circumstances, then we can enter into the spirit of this text. The fulfilment of God's promises should surely never be a cold unemotional experience, to be received with stiff correctness or formality. Sarah's laughter, both of humour and of joy, was true worship given to God after the most miraculous event that can happen to any woman, certainly in these circumstances. In this, she can teach us a great deal, just as the Psalms which speak of laughter, for example 'Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy.' (Ps 126:2 and Psalm 113:9)

The conclusion of our passage concerns the weaning of Isaac (v8). This would have taken place around the age of 3 years, and though such a period of breastfeeding is longer than we would imagine today, it was appropriate for nourishment and survival in ancient times. When Isaac was weaned, Abraham held a feast, for a child that had survived the first years of life was now one that had a future. The big question for Abraham was whether he would formally accept

Isaac as his heir. Now we might think that this would be obvious, given all that had gone before, but unfortunately it was not. Remember, Abraham did already have another son of whom he was rather fond, whose name was Ishmael (see ch16). We who know the path of the divine promise with scripture know what to expect, but Abraham was still weak and more difficulties lay ahead before Isaac would be truly accepted by him as the child of Covenant. The story continues tomorrow!

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## Discipleship

### Application

Today's passage reinforces a spiritual truth which is focussed on Sarah. The Lord often places His hand upon a particular person, man or woman, for a particular purpose at a particular time, and it may be that God will lead someone through many experiences before they reach the moment for which they have been prepared. This was true for Sarah, and it remains true for many of the Lord's people today. In an age which often revels in the present rather than giving time to considering the past or the future, the long and sometimes painful journey of Abraham and Sarah is a reminder of real life. There is no substitute for travelling with the Lord over a substantial period of time. Both Sarah and Abraham learned about their faults as well as their strengths on their long journey of life! Yet ageism is not the point. What the Lord looks for in any generation is people who will travel the path of Christian discipleship with sufficient faithfulness for Him to use them specifically as and when He chooses, and either with or without their knowledge. That is powerful and faithful Christian discipleship.

Secondly, one birth from ancient times appears to be not much upon which to base God's entire saving strategy for the world; but that is what God did, and He was in control! We should never be surprised at the ways of the Lord, and events that we may think of as insignificant may prove to be of supreme importance in God's plans. It is hard for us to think on this scale, even though we try, and although we do our best to understand the mysteries of God's grace and our place in His Kingdom, we should expect Him to do things that appear to be mysterious or even miraculous. These things point us beyond ourselves and make us consider the God who made the world. Neither should we think that God is all about deadly seriousness, because just as He did for Abraham and Sarah, He may lead us to laugh with joy at the greatness and majesty of Almighty God!

### Questions for groups

1. In what ways has the Lord 'visited' you? In what ways has the Lord 'visited' your church?
2. How do we know when the Lord has placed His hand upon us for some special work? If this is your experience, how did you respond?
3. What place does laughter have in the worship of God's people?

### Discipleship challenges

- *What do you do on a daily basis? What is your routine of life and what is so important that without it, you could not feel that things were 'normal'? Always remember that the Lord may challenge you precisely at those points in your life that seem to you to be fixed!*
- *Look back over your life and make a list of the miraculous events which have blessed you from time to time. Praise God for these regularly.*

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## Final Prayer

Surprise us each day with Your generous love, we pray O Lord, and give us hope that evil will truly be overcome by good within Your Kingdom. Open our eyes to see how You are doing this in our world, even now, and equip us for the battles that lie ahead. We praise You for Your vision and Your provision O Lord AMEN

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