

Prayers

Opening prayer

Jesus Christ, Lord of all, the world in which we live is full of darkness as well as light, full of sorrow as well as joy, and full of trouble as well as peace. Give us the courage and discernment we need to live the Gospel message, which proclaims darkness turned into light, sorrow transformed into joy and trouble changed into peace. We ask this with conviction, because as Your people, You have prepared us and called us to this great task. AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

1. For yourself

Ask the Lord to help you remain close to Him this day; listen for His Word throughout the day

2. For your friends and family

Ask the Lord to protect your family and friends from temptation and from evil

3. For the church and its work

Ask the Lord to bless all those who, this day, will do the administrative work of the church, unseen by most and yet hopefully valued by all

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

Ask the Lord to intervene wherever in the world children's lives are put at risk by greed and inhumanity. Ask the Lord to raise up people who will speak His words and do His will to protect the vulnerable in society

Meditation

A prayer of dedication, aspiration and hope

In the time you have given me to live and worship You,
May I take my stand for what is right, and against all evil.

May I put the Gospel into action in everything I say and do,
And show the same love to others as has been shown to me.

Remove from me all falsehood, domination, and secrecy;
And establish honesty and integrity deep within my heart.

Make me ready to forgive my brothers and sisters in faith,
And not stand back from the responsibility to love like Christ.

Give me the patience to wait for the fulfilment of Your Word,
And the courage to persist in faith through all earthly trials.

Show me when Your judgement is about to come on earth,
Opening up before all people God's righteousness and truth.

Then, bring me to a place of quietness, healing and peace,
Where I can rest in the promises of God and feel their power.

For having followed Your call through every part of my life,
My soul is finally liberated into the safety of Your love.

Bible Study

Bible passage – Genesis 21: 9-21

⁹ Now Sarah saw that Isaac was being laughed at by Hagar's son (that child of Hagar the Egyptian, borne to Abraham). ¹⁰ She said,

'Throw out this slave woman with her son, for the son of this slave should not share your inheritance together with my son Isaac.'

¹¹ The whole matter upset Abraham greatly, because of his elder son. ¹² But God said to Abraham,

'Do not be distressed about the boy and your servant girl. Do whatever Sarah tells you to do, for your descendants will be recorded through Isaac. ¹³ As for the son of the servant girl, because he is your son I will make a nation of him as well.'

¹⁴ So Abraham got up early in the morning, took bread and a skin of water, and gave them to Hagar; then he put these on her shoulder, and sent her and the child away. She left and roamed around in the desert regions of Beer-sheba.

¹⁵ When the water in the skin was gone, she abandoned the child under one of the bushes. ¹⁶ Then she sat down some way off, about a bowshot; for she prayed,

'Please don't let me see the child die.'

When she sat down at a distance, she called out, and he was crying.

¹⁷ Then God heard the boy's voice; and His angel called to Hagar from heaven and said to her,

'What is the matter, Hagar? Don't be afraid! God has heard the boy's voice coming from where he is. ¹⁸ Go over and lift up the boy and hold on to him by the hand, for I will make him into a great nation.'

¹⁹ Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went over and filled the skin with water, and gave the boy a drink.

²⁰ God was with the boy as he grew up. He lived in the desert regions, and became an expert with the bow. ²¹ He lived in the wilderness of Paran; and his mother obtained a wife for him from the land of Egypt.

Review

This amazing story contains the description of the defining moment of Abraham's life when he had to make up his mind about following God's will or his own. He had two sons, Ishmael and Isaac, and only one of them could be his heir. Abraham had always loved his eldest son Ishmael (17:18,20) because Ishmael was his first-born even though he was the child of Hagar. However, God had made it very clear throughout the stories of Genesis that the Covenant promises for the future of Abraham's descendants would lie with the younger son of his wife Sarah, who was Isaac. The truth was that Abraham had nobly tried to hold together his extended family, and keep both Ishmael and Isaac in his affections whilst sustaining a personal preference for one child (Ishmael) even though God had told Him that his partiality was not right (see 17:18,19). He showed good intentions, but did not follow the Lord's instructions fully and therefore demonstrated a weakness which had to be overcome if God's will was to be done.

In our passage today, circumstances came to a head when his wife, Sarah, challenged Abraham about his attitude towards his inheritance (21:10). Abraham had to put aside his own feelings, and accept God's will by making Isaac his heir and separating the family from Hagar and Ishmael (21:12f.). Despite the clear call of God through the miraculous birth of Isaac, it was not easy for Abraham to abandon Ishmael, the son he loved, and let him and his mother go as if to die in the wilderness, but he had to trust that God was in control and would look after them both. From Abraham's point of view, it was a life and death decision, and he had no way of knowing what would happen to the two of them when he let them go into the desert.

The whole story contains snapshots of all the main characters in this part of the story of Abraham's succession. Isaac is barely mentioned at the beginning of the passage, but the mention of his name set off the whole train of events; Ishmael mocked the younger child's precious, God-given name, in the hearing of Isaac's mother Sarah! She was not going to tolerate such behaviour (21:9), and immediately confronted Abraham about it all (21:10f.). In all this, Sarah comes across as the protective mother, and with the Lord's blessing she forced Abraham to make up his mind about his sons, and God backed her by telling Abraham to do as he was told (21:12)! Abraham appears here as a man still struggling with personal weaknesses of faith; God had to tell him to be obedient to his wife, and his wife had to tell him to be obedient to God! Ishmael is pictured at the beginning of the story laughing at Isaac, but at the end of it he has received his

own blessing, reinforcing what we already know (17:18ff) about God's intent to bless, not curse all the sons of Abraham. He then had to travel his own painful route to find God's blessing, surviving abandonment in the desert.

There is no doubt that although the story revolves around the blessings of inheritance given to Isaac and Ishmael, together with Abraham's painful decision to follow the Lord's will, the story of Hagar in the desert is most powerfully told. After Abraham accepted what he had to do, the narrative is heavy with pathos as it tells us how he sent Ishmael and Hagar away from the security of his nomadic home (21:14). The story then pulls at our heart-strings as we survey the terrible scene in which Hagar left her son to die, when all seemed lost. However, the God who decided to work for the salvation of the whole world through Isaac, the son of Abraham, was big enough to bless Hagar and Ishmael by saving them miraculously and fulfilling His own separate promise for Ishmael's blessing.

There are a number of important spiritual issues raised by this text, and amongst these are obedience, faith, listening, trusting all to the Lord, and God's blessing of others through His people. All of them are worthy of our careful attention. However, as far as scripture is concerned, once Abraham has made his decision and followed the Lord's will, the story can move on to its climax, and ultimate test of faith (see chapter 22).

Going Deeper

We must immediately look at two things in more depth. Firstly, we must look at the relationship between Abraham and Sarah and work out why they reacted as they did to the situation they faced. Secondly, what happened to Hagar and Ishmael as they were cast out into the desert. One strange feature of the story is that although Ishmael is talked of with some sympathy, his name is never mentioned!

Sarah's offence

There is no doubt that Sarah was incensed at what she saw when Ishmael made fun of Isaac (21:9). To make fun of someone is one thing, but to make fun of a younger child whose name meant 'to laugh' was mockery. If we read this passage of scripture as following on directly from the previous verse (21:8), then this incident happened at the feast given by Abraham for the weaning of Isaac when he was three years old (see 21:8). At that time, Sarah would have been very sensitive to the comparisons between her own son at three, and the older Ishmael who would have been around 15 or 16 (if we compare the dates and ages of Abraham quoted to us in 16:16 and 17:1). The offence caused by Ishmael's mockery has been the subject of detailed research by scholars, but I do not think we can find any more within the story other than the play-acting rivalry of two sons of very different ages; one just beginning conscious childhood (Isaac), and the other anticipating the favouritism of the elder son (Ishmael). All we can say for sure is that when emotions run high, the smallest of sparks will light a fire that has been waiting to burn!

One remarkable feature of this text is that God instructed Abraham; 'do what Sarah tells you to do' (21:12). This sounds very strange, coming from a time when society assumed male domination. We have noticed several places in Genesis where the relationship between Abraham and Sarah was evidently special, and although the two of them lived according to the culture and assumptions of the day, they sometimes showed a quite different quality of relationship. Their mutual submission to each other and to God is something that transcends time and points forward to later texts in scripture which emphasise the equality of men and women in marriage before God (e.g. Matthew 19:3-6 and Ephesians 5:21f.). Here in this passage, as both Abraham and Sarah were struggling with the emotional and practical consequences of bearing a child in their 'old age', the only way for God to force Abraham to listen to Him and forget Ishmael was to tell him to listen to his wife Sarah! Sarah had risked her life for Abraham on a number of occasions; twice when they wandered into foreign territory (12:10-20; 20:1-18) and she had risked her life in giving birth to Isaac at a dangerously elderly age. By so doing, Sarah had earned the right to speak to her husband and tell him that her sacrifices should not be ignored. What she had done was God's means to fulfil His Covenant promise to Abraham!

In the text, the strength of Sarah's words come across in a number of ways. Hagar is mentioned by name, but she is not called Sarah's 'servant girl' as she was in Genesis 16, but a 'slave'. Evidently, her status had declined since she returned from the earlier incident in which she had run away from Abraham (16:6ff). Sarah's words were now cutting; 'throw out this slave woman ...' (21:10) was a strong expression which is only used elsewhere in the Old Testament for when Pharaoh became fed up with the people of Israel and threw them out of Egypt! (Ex 6:1, 12:39). If Hagar is diminished in status by this story, Ishmael himself is strangely not mentioned at all. In verse 9, he is dismissed as 'that child of Hagar the Egyptian, born to Abraham', and even when he is abandoned under a bush in the desert at the point of death, he is referred to as 'the child' (21:16) or 'the boy' (21:18). It seems as if the writers of scripture have infused the whole story with Sarah's antipathy!

Hagar and Ishmael in the desert

Abraham, however, could not dismiss Hagar and Ishmael so easily, even if he did what God told him and was obedient to his wife. He acted with great care in sending Hagar and Ishmael away into the desert (21:14), but he knew that the Lord had promised He would take care of them (21:12,13). His heavy heart was more to do with the loss of a son he loved and who he would never see again, so complete was the separation that both God and Sarah required. Some older translations have Abraham placing Ishmael on Hagar's shoulders as if he were a small infant, but the Ishmael of this story was older (see above) and the Hebrew of the verse only indicates that Ishmael accompanied Hagar. I mention this because there is great confusion in some people's minds between this story (in which Ishmael is a teenager), and the earlier 'flight of Hagar' incident of Genesis 16 (in which Ishmael is a small child).

Hagar was lost in the desert with her son, as is strongly implied by verse 14, and the food and water given them by Abraham would have lasted only a couple of days. The awful scene of Ishmael being left in the shade of a bush by his mother because she feared his imminent death (21:16) seems to suddenly jump out of the pages of scripture at us, for little sympathy had been shown to the two of them up to this point. God, however, had promised them safety and blessing, and the miracle of deliverance by which they were saved from the desert is presented to us with graphic humanity (21:17-19). Even though we know that God will indeed look after the two of them, it is hard not to feel emotional as we read this story.

Ishmael's name, we should remember, means 'God has heard' (16:15), and although his name is not written anywhere in our passage, the Hebrew of the storyline is full of the same word from which his name is derived. Every time the word 'hear' occurs in the text (21:16,17 – twice), we are reminded of his name; he is a boy of blessing (21:12,17,20) and the son of Abraham. The story ends with him growing up, living in the desert and gaining expertise and skills as an adult, and with the return of his mother to her homeland of Egypt to find him a wife (21:21).

Discipleship

Application

At the end of the story, laughter has been turned into weeping and then resolved by the Lord's guidance and direction. This was a necessary heartache for Abraham in order for the Covenant blessing to be passed on exclusively to Isaac. The story of Hagar's plight in the desert is deeply emotional, but we will discover that even this story is a preparation for what comes next in scripture. For a long time, the long story of Abraham's life has been building up to the climax which happens in chapter 22, which is the point at which Abraham is asked to sacrifice his son Isaac on an altar to the Lord. What we have read today prepares us for this profoundly emotional and spiritually significant event, and we must read the story of Hagar and Ishmael in its light.

So the Lord does miracles and performs deliverance for those like Hagar and Ishmael who are not his chosen! All of us, like Abraham, face situations in our lives that make little sense in the context of our journey of faith; things that may have happened which do not reflect well on our journey of faith but the consequences of which do not just 'go away'. Sometimes these things are not just abstract situations, but they involve real people who we are close to or love, who for whatever reason, are not part of God's people the church. All of these may well cause us deep distress or lie at the root of some very deep emotions. There are many Christian parents who are troubled about the future of their apparently non-believing children, for example. However, if we are truly walking with our Lord, then the story we have read today can be a great comfort. The Lord says 'do not be distressed ...' (21:12) to Abraham, by way of reassurance that He is in control and that if Abraham will trust the Lord, then He will look after Hagar and Ishmael and their future. It does not seem fair to Abraham from a human point of view, but faith and trust in God is the only route to peace for Abraham as a child of God himself.

It is true for most of us that when the Lord gives us time to examine our lives, we may be led to let some things go which have been part of our lives for some time and perhaps even loved deeply, but our faith in God means that we must let them go, and trust God completely. We think of Abraham as a man of faith not just because he responded to God by being obedient, but because he was prepared to exercise that greater faith of trusting Him for the unknown. When he released Hagar and Ishmael, his final test was yet to come, but it was a vital step on his journey of faith.

Questions for groups

1. What does the story of Hagar and Ishmael tell us about God's blessing of those who are outside His covenant purposes?

2. Go through this passage of scripture and make a list of the different emotions you feel about the story. Compare notes with others and share what you have felt.
3. In what ways does the Lord bring blessing out of distress in your own life, or the life of your church?

Discipleship challenges

- *What does the Lord require you to 'let go' so that you can be liberated into His service and be released into greater things? It is a challenging question but one which never goes away. Fast and pray about this as you feel appropriate.*
- *Praise the Lord for His desire to bless people in all situations of life, and spend time giving the Lord praise for all His love and care for the people He has made.*

Final Prayer

Father of grace, may we not turn away from the gifts You would like to give us. You offer us so much; open our eyes to Your love for us, and everything You would like to do both with us and through us by the power of Your Holy Spirit. Father of grace, may we turn to You with gratitude and a willing spirit: AMEN
