

## Genesis 21:1 – 34

<sup>1</sup> Then the LORD took note of Sarah as He had said, and the LORD did for Sarah as He had promised. <sup>2</sup> So Sarah conceived and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the appointed time of which God had spoken to him. <sup>3</sup> Abraham called the name of his son who was born to him, whom Sarah bore to him, Isaac. <sup>4</sup> Then Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. <sup>5</sup> Now Abraham was one hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. <sup>6</sup> Sarah said, ‘God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me.’ <sup>7</sup> And she said, ‘Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age.’ <sup>8</sup> The child grew and was weaned, and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. <sup>9</sup> Now Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, mocking. <sup>10</sup> Therefore she said to Abraham, ‘Drive out this maid and her son, for the son of this maid shall not be an heir with my son Isaac.’ <sup>11</sup> The matter distressed Abraham greatly because of his son. <sup>12</sup> But God said to Abraham, ‘Do not be distressed because of the lad and your maid; whatever Sarah tells you, listen to her, for through Isaac your descendants shall be named. <sup>13</sup> And of the son of the maid I will make a nation also, because he is your descendant.’ <sup>14</sup> So Abraham rose early in the morning and took bread and a skin of water and gave them to Hagar, putting them on her shoulder, and gave her the boy, and sent her away. And she departed and wandered about in the wilderness of Beersheba. <sup>15</sup> When the water in the skin was used up, she left the boy under one of the bushes. <sup>16</sup> Then she went and sat down opposite him, about a bowshot away, for she said, ‘Do not let me see the boy die.’ And she sat opposite him, and lifted up her voice and wept. <sup>17</sup> God heard the lad crying; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, ‘What is the matter with you, Hagar? Do not fear, for God has heard the voice of the lad where he is. <sup>18</sup> Arise, lift up the lad, and hold him by the hand, for I will make a great nation of him.’ <sup>19</sup> 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. <sup>20</sup> God was with the lad, and he grew; and he lived in the wilderness and became an archer. <sup>21</sup> He lived in the wilderness of Paran, and his mother took a wife for him from the land of Egypt. <sup>22</sup> Now it came about 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; <sup>23</sup> now therefore, swear to me here by God that you will not deal falsely with me or with my offspring or with my posterity, but according to the kindness that I have shown to you, you shall show to me and to the land in which you have sojourned.’ <sup>24</sup> Abraham said, ‘I swear it.’ <sup>25</sup> But Abraham complained to Abimelech because of the well of water which the servants of Abimelech had seized. <sup>26</sup> And Abimelech said, ‘I do not know who has done this thing; you did not tell me, nor did I hear of it until today.’ <sup>27</sup> Abraham took sheep and oxen and gave them to Abimelech, and the two of them made a covenant. <sup>28</sup> Then Abraham set seven ewe lambs of the flock by themselves. <sup>29</sup> Abimelech said to Abraham, ‘What do these seven ewe lambs mean, which you have set by themselves?’ <sup>30</sup> He said, ‘You shall take these seven ewe lambs from my hand so that it may be a witness to me, that I dug this well.’ <sup>31</sup> Therefore he called that place Beersheba, because there the two of them took an oath. <sup>32</sup> So they made a covenant at Beersheba; and Abimelech and Phicol, the commander of his army, arose and returned to the land of the Philistines. <sup>33</sup> Abraham planted a tamarisk tree at Beersheba, and there he called on the name of the LORD, the Everlasting God. <sup>34</sup> And Abraham sojourned in the land of the Philistines for many days.

#### Historical and Cultural Background

- Children were weaned at three years (2 Macc.7:27). This joyfulness over Isaac's birth lasted a long time!
- Recall that Isaac's name meant 'he laughs.' Ishmael means 'God will hear.'
- The story is bound together with a play on three Hebrew words. In Hebrew, the word 'water' is *mayim*; 'to hear' is *shema*; and 'heaven' is *shemayim*.
- God had said to Abraham regarding Ishmael, 'As for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold, I will bless him, and will make him fruitful and will multiply him exceedingly. He shall become the father of twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation. But My covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you at this season next year.' (Gen.17:21 – 22)

## Questions

1. Trace through the emotions for people in this story. Who feels what, and when?
  - a. Great joy in v.1 – 8, especially for Sarah – that’s suggested by the narrator saying that God was fulfilling His word to *Sarah* (v.1)
  - b. Laughter for Sarah (v.6 – 8)
  - c. For three years, until Isaac is weaned, there seems to be great celebration and happiness.
  - d. Then something spoils it – an old jealousy and rivalry. Notice once again that the sin is internal to Sarah. It’s a repeat of the jealousy and rivalry she felt in Gen.16. It replays the sin of Cain, and prior to Cain, Adam and Eve.
2. How does Sarah feel about Hagar and Ishmael? How does Abraham?
  - a. Sarah doesn’t use Hagar’s name or Ishmael’s name. She only calls them ‘the maid’ and ‘her son’ (v.9). She belittles them.
  - b. But Abraham thinks of Ishmael as ‘his son’ (v.10). He can’t put distance between himself and Ishmael. Notice that Abraham loves Ishmael. He even advocated to God for Ishmael in Gen.17
3. Why does God say to Abraham to let go of Ishmael?
  - a. It’s ironic, certainly. Abraham got into trouble before by listening to Sarah
  - b. It seems unfair, but God will address that in ch.22 when he asks Abraham to let go of Isaac, too
  - c. Does He do that to care for Sarah?
  - d. Is it just time for Ishmael to branch out anyway? I think so...
  - e. But not without a blessing from God, a promise God makes to Abraham to care for these people that Abraham also cares for. That is what helps Abraham let go. Although we could also look at Abraham as having a double motive (wanting to please Sarah and have peace at home). Is Abraham doing this with real faith in God’s ability to keep them alive? We’ll also see that in Genesis 22.
4. What happens to Hagar and Ishmael?
  - a. Ishmael almost dies of thirst
  - b. Hagar’s tears are the only water in the desert
  - c. But God tells Hagar not to abandon Ishmael, and reminds her of the promise He made to her in Gen.16, that he will become a great nation, and she will be a matriarch.
  - d. God opened her eyes in v.19 and she saw a well of water. This is a reversal of her request to not ‘see the boy die’ in v.16. This is also a continuation of the theme of sight from God’s interactions with Hagar in Gen.16. This is also a repeat of the well of water from that same section. It is a faint echo of the supernatural well of water in Eden that divided into four rivers (Gen.2).
  - e. There is a play on words here: To hear (shema) from heaven (shemayim) is to receive water (mayim). For heaven (shemayim) to hear (shema) your prayers results in water (mayim).
5. Why is this story of Abraham and Abimelech here?
  - a. The continuity is Beersheba: v.14, 31, 32, 33
  - b. Somehow Abraham seems to learn about how God has provided for Hagar and Ishmael through the well of water. He complains to Abimelech that his servants had seized the well where Hagar and Ishmael drank.
  - c. God must have told Abraham about this. That is implied.
  - d. Abraham plants a tree a Beersheba because he knows there is water there, and as a memorial to God’s provision for Hagar and Ishmael.
  - e. For Abraham, this is a reminder of God’s faithfulness. He is encouraged by it, and it bears life. Once again, there is a faint echo of Eden, where a tree is planted by a well of water.
6. What’s the hardest thing about letting go of a blessing, whose time has come and God calls us to let it go?
  - a. Abraham needs to let go of each of his sons. This is how he let go of Ishmael. In the next chapter, we will see how he lets go of Isaac. This is not a ‘test’ of faith. This is simply faith. God wants to use Ishmael and Isaac in greater ways than Abraham could imagine.
  - b. We may want to possess the blessing. But we cannot. It belongs to God.
  - c. This is what Scottish pastor and author George MacDonald wrote when he and his wife lost a son in infancy:

Twilight of the transfiguration-joy

Gleam-faced, pure-eyed, strong willed, high hearted boy!

Hardly thy life clear forth of heaven was sent,

Ere it broke out into a smile, and went.  
So swiftly thy growth, so true thy goalward bent,  
Thou, child and saint inextricably blent,  
Will one day teach thy father in some heavenly tent  
--George Macdonald, *Diary of an Old Soul* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1975), 131