



BEGINNINGS

A Study of the Book of Genesis

Sanctuary Bible Studies – Woodbury Lutheran Church

Session 17, The Birth of Laughter (Genesis 21)

Genesis 20 gave us a glimpse into the flawed character of both Abraham and Sarah in repeatedly using a lie to protect Abraham from neighboring kings. With Pharaoh in Egypt and Abimelech in Gerar, Abraham and Sarah neglected to tell them that Sarah was Abraham's wife. At risk was the indisputable paternity of Abraham. Both kings took Sarah into their harem only to release her at God's command. The message for us as readers? If God's promises come true for Abraham and Sarah, it will be because of God's grace, not because of their character or action. In Genesis 21, God's promise of a son called Laughter (Isaac) comes true.

1. THE BIRTH OF LAUGHTER (21:1-7)

- Vs. 1: The word, "gracious" is also translated "visited" or "come to" and is used of Hannah becoming pregnant with Samuel (1 Sam 2:21) and Elizabeth becoming pregnant with John the Baptist (Luke 1:68).
- Vs. 2, "at the very time God had promised him": A year earlier, God had set the time for Sarah to become pregnant (18:10).
- Vs. 3-4: Abraham names his newborn son "Isaac," just as God had commanded (Gen 17:19). Isaac means "laughter." Abraham circumcises Isaac just as God had commanded (Gen 17:9-14).
- Vss. 6-7 show how the name "Isaac" now expresses Sarah's joy and the joy of others who hear she's had a child and at 90 is nursing him! Now the laughter was about God's amazing action and grace. For the first laughter of Abraham and then of Sarah at God's promise, see Genesis 17:17 and 18:12-15).

2. A FEAST GONE BAD (21:8-20)

- Vss. 8-10: When Isaac is weaned at the age of 2 or 3, Abraham hosts a feast. (See Psalm 131:2 for being weaned as a picture of rest and quiet.) At the feast Sarah observes Ishmael (Abraham's son by the servant girl, Hagar), mocking Isaac. Paul in Galatians 4:28-31 writes that Ishmael "persecuted" Isaac. Sarah's joy has turned sour. She wants Hagar and Isaac out of the household and out of the inheritance.
Ishmael, now in his mid-teens, has been told for years that he is the child of promise and inheritance. For the last three years, though, that message changed. At this feast no doubt he hears speeches in praise of Isaac, as the child of promise. Isaac has moved center stage, and Ishmael responds with bitterness that yields ridicule.
- Vss. 11-13: Abraham has legal reasons for being distressed at Sarah's request. Expulsion of a slave girl's son was forbidden in most legal codes in this area and time. Even more important, though, is his love for his son. God intervenes, telling Abraham to do what Sarah says and trust God to make a nation of Ishmael as well. Remember, Ishmael was a living reminder of Abraham and Sarah's attempt to fulfill God's promises their own way, yet God here again shows mercy.

- Vss. 14-21: "The next morning" shows again Abraham's quick obedience to God, despite how hard this has to be for him. He sends Hagar and Ishmael off into the desert with food and water. When the water runs out, Hagar fears for Ishmael's life, placing him in the shade and walking off so that she doesn't have to watch him die. "God heard the boy crying" is a play on the meaning of the name, Ishmael ("God hears"). God intervenes. An angel gives Hagar instructions and renews the promise concerning Ishmael. She must take steps for God's help to be hers. She does and finds a well, and Ishmael is saved. He lives in the desert, becomes an archer, and marries a woman from Egypt. Once again a promise of God is shown to be fulfilled by God's own grace and provision with a test of trust.

Ishmael

Birth arranged by Sarah
 Conceived by Hagar
 Son of a slave
 Abraham named him after his birth
 Circumcised as a boy

Isaac

Birth arranged by God
 Conceived by Sarah
 Born free
 God named him before his birth
 Circumcised on the 8th day

3. THE TREATY WITH ABIMELECH (21:22-34)

- Vss. 22-24: About three years have passed since Abimelech showed kindness to Abraham and Sarah. Now, as he has watched Abraham prosper, he asks for assurances (with his army chief of staff present) that Abraham will deal kindly with him as a friend. At issue no doubt is the threat Abraham presents, living so close to Gerar. Abraham agrees to Abimelech's request.
- Vss. 25-34: The matter of Abimelech's servants seizing a well is raised by Abraham. Abimelech pleads ignorance. Then animals are brought forward for a covenant ceremony. Abraham also brings forward seven lambs as a witness that he had dug the well there, making it his. Remember, Abraham's credibility with Abimelech was not strong. Rivalry over wells is significant here. It will play into another treaty with Abimelech in chapter 26. "Beersheba," the name of the place where this covenant is cut, means "well of the oath." Beersheba later becomes the southern border point of Israel's monarchy. Tourists can see "Abraham's well" there. After Abimelech and his party are gone, Abraham plants a tamarisk tree at Beersheba and calls on the name of the Lord in prayer. The name of God used here, "El Olam" ("Eternal God"), only occurs here. This whole section – the treaty, the sinking of a well, and the planting of a tree – shows the promises of God taking root in the land.

BE GINNINGS

1. Stillness in the LORD is worthy of celebration.
2. Ridicule often expresses the inner bitterness of the one doing the ridiculing.
3. In grace, God has a way of turning our mistakes into blessings.
4. Often, when God has a blessing to give us, He asks us to take initial steps of trust.
5. Promises sink roots and wellsprings deep.
6. God is eternal.