



Lesson 12 | God's Constant Grace

Genesis 21:1-21

Life is a series of ups and downs. We go from wonderful, exciting, joyful seasons to discouraging, sorrowful, and dry seasons of life. Few of us remain on the mountaintop forever, and few of us never know anything but sadness. Most of humanity vacillates between the two: between joy and sorrow; between hope and despair; between contentment and emptiness. Yet throughout all life, the good times and the bad, the one thing that never changes is God's constant grace. When we are excited and everything is going well, God is with us and He rejoices with us. When we are confused and discouraged, God is with us and He guides us. And when we are at a total loss, unsure of how we will ever move forward, God is with us and He holds us.

Why do you think life is not a constant, never-ending joyful adventure? What would we miss if it were?

In this account of Abraham's life, we see all three. We see Abraham and Sarah rejoicing in God's faithfulness to His Word and in His goodness to them. We see Abraham torn about the growing conflict between Isaac and Ishmael, and between Hagar and Sarah. Finally, we see Hagar completely despondent and ready to die. Most importantly, in all these situations we see God working for good.

God's Grace in Our Joys (21:1-8)

Genesis 21 begins with a beautiful, happy scene. After waiting for many years, Abraham and Sarah have a child together. We then briefly read about two key events from his early childhood: his circumcision and weening and the celebrations associated with both.

God Keeps His Word (21:1-2)

Three times in the first two verses we read the same phrase: "as he had said," "as he had spoken," "of which God had spoken to him." God did what He said He would do, and the biblical author highlights that point so that it's impossible for us to miss it. The whole story up until this point has been building anticipation as to what will happen, and when the promised child at last comes we are reminded that this is the promised child, and the one who came at the right time.

Why do you think the timing matters? Why did God wait so long? What would have been missed if Sarah had Isaac under normal circumstances?

Abraham Obeys Gods Word (21:3-5)

The next sequence we read shows Abraham doing what God had commanded him: he gives Isaac the name he was told to give him and he circumcises his son on the eighth day. The first few verses show us God's faithfulness to His Words, and these next few verses show us Abraham's obedience to God's Words. There is a general principle at play here: God's faithfulness demands our obedience. Because God is always faithful to what He has said He will do, we should obey Him in whatever He tells us.

What do we do if it seems to us like God has not or is not being faithful to His Word? How should we respond?

Sarah and Abraham Rejoice (21:6-8)

Earlier in the story God had told Sarah to name the child Isaac ("laughter") because she laughed in disbelief (as had Abraham earlier) when the angel told her that she would have a son. Now Sarah is still laughing, but it's not in unbelief. Now Sarah laughs for joy and proclaims that all who hear of this wonderful, unbelievable occurrence will join her in laughter. Here we see an old woman who is overwhelmed by the goodness of God in her life and who explains the name of her child as a reminder that God's ways are marvelous and sometimes all you can do is laugh. After this declaration by Sarah, we read of young Isaac's growth and of a feast thrown for him on the day he is weaned. God has done marvelous things for this couple, and they are excited about it and rejoice in it.

How can we rejoice in what God has done for us? Why do we often fail to show proper joy and gratitude for God's work on our behalf?

God's Grace in Our Confusion (21:9-13)

But the joy of Isaac's birth is immediately overshadowed by a new problem: the relationship between Ishmael and Isaac. The story quickly shifts from showing us a joyful occasion to showing us a much older brother mocking his half-brother. Sarah sees this problem as a sign of greater problems to come and takes action to protect her son.

Ishmael Mocks Isaac (21:9)

While some try to translate the word translated as "mocking" as something more friendly like "playing," it is more likely that there is some kind of malice at play here. Keeping track of the time references in Genesis can be helpful at this point. Abraham entered Canaan when he was 75 (Genesis 12:4), and fathered Ishmael roughly ten years later (Genesis 16:3) when Abraham was 85. Since Abraham is 100 when Isaac is born, that means that Ishmael is about 15 years older than Isaac. Isaac would likely have been weaned when he was two or three years old. This means that when we hear Ishmael is mocking, he is a young adult making fun of a toddler.

Think about Abraham's story from Ishmael's perspective. Why would he be mocking Isaac, and what would such mockery show us about Ishmael?

Sarah Demands Ishmael's Expulsion (21:10-11)

Sarah sees this for what it is, a threat to Isaac. Ishmael is older, probably rougher (21:12), and Sarah doesn't want him to stick around and share the inheritance with her son Isaac. Sarah argues that since Hagar is a slave her son will not only receive less of an inheritance from Abraham, but that he should receive nothing at all. Abraham is grieved by this, as he loves both Isaac and Ishmael, and is torn up by the thought of sending Ishmael away. Abraham's unbelieving choices have caused him a problem. There is wisdom in what Sarah suggests, as Ishmael has demonstrated his feelings toward the child at a young age. But how can Abraham bring himself to cast his son out into the desert?

Can you think of other examples from Scripture when someone's sinful choice in the past led to a messy situation in the present?

How should we respond when we find ourselves in such situations?

God Instructs Abraham to Send Hagar Away (21:12-13)

God could have let Abraham feel the sting of his choices. He could have left him to question and fret and try to solve the problem on his own. But in his kindness and grace, God comes to Abraham and fixes his problem in at least two ways. First, He tells Abraham what to do. Abraham should listen to his wife on this one, her advice is sound. Ishmael will not inherit with Isaac, and he needs to be sent away. But God is also kind to let Abraham know that God was not done with Ishmael, but that he too would become a great nation.

Why would God help Abraham out of the mess that Abraham had created?

What does this teach us about God's dealing in our lives?

God's Grace in our Desperation (21:14-21)

The final scene in this sequence is a sad one. After initially fleeing from Sarah because of how she was mistreated, Hagar is this time expelled because of her son's mistreatment of Isaac. Whereas last time she had the option to return if she would humble herself, that option is gone. Instead, Hagar finds herself ready to die in the wilderness.

Hagar's Desperate Situation (21:14-16)

Abraham gives Hagar provisions for the trip, but in the end he does send her out with her son to wander in the wilderness. After some time they run out of water, and rather than watch her son die Hagar puts him under a tree and goes away to weep. One would be hard pressed to find a more desperate situation

for a person to be in. A mother is dying, her son is dying, and she is so distraught she can't even bear to watch him die and so she leaves him behind. It is important to note that at this point, Hagar has done what God asked her to do – go back and submit to Sarah – and yet now she finds herself in the wilderness again ready to die. God had earlier given her a prophecy about her son (16:12), and at that time Hagar had been overwhelmed that God saw and heard her. Now she has given up hope and is expecting her son to die despite God's prophecy.

Why does God sometimes allow us to find ourselves in desperate situations, even when on a human level we haven't personally done anything to deserve it?

How can we, like Hagar, find it incredibly hard to believe God in drastic circumstances?

God Speaks to Hagar (21:17-18)

There is an interesting wordplay to begin this section. We read that God hears the lad, or the young man. Don't forget that Ishmael's name means "God hears," and so this account begins with God hearing "God hears." Interestingly, we don't hear about Hagar crying out to God, but apparently Ishmael did and God heard Ishmael. So God comes to Hagar and tells her that He isn't done with her or with her son, that there is still much He has planned. Here in the desert, speaking to a rival of the promised son Isaac, God is showing goodness and favor to Hagar and Ishmael. God had instructed Abraham to send Ishmael away, but God that did not mean that God forget about Ishmael or the promises He made concerning Ishmael.

Earlier in this series we marveled at the fact that the biblical story stopped to spend so much time on Hagar, a runaway Egyptian slave. Now the story once again focuses on her and her story, and now that of her son as well. God is doing something through Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac that He is not doing through Hagar and Ishmael, but God is still doing good to and for Ishmael.

Why would God bind Himself to bless Ishmael and His descendants as a mighty nation?

How should God's actions here impact the way we think about the rest of the Old Testament story?

God Protects Ishmael (20:19-21)

Once again, there is a certain irony about this passage that can be easily missed. Hagar and Ishmael are wandering in Beer-sheba, a place name that means "the well of the oath," and yet they have no water. This naturally raises the question, "Well, isn't there a well nearby you, guys?" Yet it is not until God opens Hagar's eyes that she is able to see the well. Once she does, she of course gets a drink and gives some water to Ishmael.

What lessons can we take from God's care for Hagar and Ishmael in this way at this time?

Finally we see that God was with Ishmael. This is a powerful statement that shouldn't be skipped over too quickly. Ishmael, the rival of Isaac, the one cast out because he was mocking Isaac, has the blessing of God upon his life. He grows up in the wilderness, becomes good with a bow, and not surprisingly Hagar takes

an Egyptian wife for him from her homeland. Ishmael's life took a very different turn than his brothers, yet God oversaw his life as well.

God's is good all the time. When we're feeling great, and when we feel empty. When life makes sense and when it is confusing. Whether we are in the promised land, or whether we are in the desert. God's goodness and His plan for people will look different, but it is the same God of grace behind it all. These three accounts from Genesis 21 – the celebration of Isaac, the conflict between Isaac and Ishmael, and the care of Ishmael in the wilderness – remind us that no matter who we are or where we are, God will provide, protect, and be good to us.

When is it hardest for you to remember God's goodness and why?