

Genesis 21

An Unlikely Illustration Of Grace

There are plenty of concepts in the Bible that we can understand because we have equivalents in our experiences. In other words, concepts like love, truth, justice, mercy make sense to us. We can relate them to what we encounter in life.

The thing that's really fascinating to me though is the fact that the cardinal principle, or truth, in the Bible has no human equivalent. That concept is something the Bible calls "grace."

And while the Bible says we can't come to God any other way but through grace, it's probably the hardest biblical essential for us to understand.

All through our lives we get what we've earned. Where we go in life depends on us. What makes grace so hard to grab onto is that it's not about us at all. Grace is God acting positively toward us when we really deserve just the opposite.

We're in a study of the Old Testament book of Genesis and we've been following the life of a man named Abraham. Today we're going to see an illustration of grace, but in an unlikely way.

Finally the day had come for Abraham.

There had been other great days for Abraham, but never a day like this. Finally, Isaac was born.

For years Abraham had waited for his promised son. He was 100 and Sarah his wife was now 90. We are not told at what age they married but it's possible that this is somewhere around their 70th year of marriage.

In all of that time they haven't conceived a child together. They're both well beyond child producing years. God had promised this son 30 years ago but up until now they had had no tangible evidence that he would ever be born.

At times they doubted, at times they were confused, at times they tried to take matters into their own hands.

But when God was ready the time was right. God was maturing and cultivating

Abraham's faith during this time. Abraham the father of the faithful needed his faith strengthened and developed so the promise was deferred until the right time.

And when the time finally came I can just see Abraham kicking up his 100 year old heels and rejoicing.

Open your Bibles to Genesis 21 page 18

I. God Fulfills His Grace Promises

Read Verse 1

It is very obvious to everybody that the birth of Isaac was a divine miracle. God exists as the Almighty One. He's omnipotent and all powerful and the scriptures don't want to leave any doubt in our mind that Isaac was a miracle.

Actually there are two specific miracles associated with this child.

Verse 2 says...

The first was a miracle of prophecy. Three times in two verses we are reminded that God has previously announced this child.

Only God can prophesy. Over the centuries there have been countless people making predictions, everyone from astrologers to supposed religious prophets.

Nostradamus, who lived in France and published his first book of prophecies in 1555 is probably the most famous. One of the things he foresaw was this:

In the year 1999 (and) seven months, from the sky will come a great King of Terror. He will resurrect the great King of Angelmois. Before and afterwards Mars rules happily.

Did you follow that? Steven Spielberg was quoted in the June, 1999 *Premiere Magazine* as saying, "Oh, I'm terrified of y2k. I think it's Nostradamus's final prediction coming true."

Every year all the newspapers they sell at the supermarket checkout have predictions from America's leading psychics.

It's amazing how interested everybody professes to be in what is going to happen. Millions read all this stuff along with horoscopes.

But listen, only God can prophesy. Outside of the Bible all the predictions regarding the future are riddled with ambiguity, error, fraud, not to mention satanic deception.

In Deuteronomy 18:22 God said if a prophet speaks something in My name and it doesn't happen, he's not My prophet. God's standard is 100% accuracy.

Prophecy is one of the main proofs for the inspiration of scripture. There are hundreds of specific, verifiable prophecies in the Bible covering everything from Israel, to the nations, to the life of Jesus Christ. The Bible even predicted the year of Jesus death 700 years in advance! God can just rip aside the veil from the future and read tomorrow's happenings, just like they had happened yesterday.

Nine months before this, God had told Abraham and Sarah that they would have a son at the set time. And so nine months later the child was born.

When God makes a promise you can be sure it's going to happen.

A New Testament Apostle named Paul, in writing to a fellow Christian named Titus about God's promise of salvation said, *in hope of eternal life which God, who cannot lie, promised before time began.* Titus 1:2

Now understand, God's promise to Abraham and Sarah was a vital part of the salvation plan that Paul was writing about in the New Testament.

God's initial promise of a son to Abraham when he was still back in the land of his birth, included a blessing for all families of the earth. That blessing was salvation for all through Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ himself was the seed of Abraham.

So it's not surprising, then, that Paul also wrote to the Christians in Galatia saying *when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman.* Galatians 4:4

The birth of Jesus Christ that we just celebrated 3 days ago, is really an extension of God's promise to Abraham and Sarah. It was in the fullness of time that Isaac was

born. Then centuries later it was in the fullness of time that the descendant of Isaac, Jesus was born.

From God's perspective Isaac was right on schedule.

The second specific miracle associated with Isaac was his birth itself. And God purposely wanted it obvious to everyone that there was no way that Isaac could have been born naturally because God wanted everyone, including us, to understand that he was working to bring about His plan in the world.

God wanted to make it clear that He's sovereign and that He's supernatural. What follows next is designed to show us Abraham's obedience.

Read verses 3-5

Abraham immediately named his son *Yitschaq*. "He laughs".

Originally when God had announced to Abraham and then Sarah that Sarah was going to give birth they both laughed.

Abraham laughed with joy, amazement, and wonder while Sarah laughed with disbelief.

So God named the child for them before he was ever conceived.

All of their lives, every time they called out Isaac's name they'd be reminded of two things. On the one hand, God's promises are no laughing matter. They're serious business. On the other hand, God's promises are a cause for joy because they demonstrate just how much He loves us.

Then Abraham circumcised his son when he was 8 days old.

S.I. McMillen, a medical doctor, wrote a little book called "None of These Diseases" that's really a classic. He showed how following God's principles corrects and prevents some of our most devastating diseases.

And one of the things that he points out is that an important blood-clotting agent, prothombrin, is at its highest natural level in the body on the 8th day after birth.

No wonder God commanded circumcision to be performed on the 8th day.

Well, of course, Abraham didn't know anything about prothombrin. He didn't have to. He circumcised his son for a spiritual reason.

This was God's command to Abraham.

Back in Genesis 17 God had said circumcision was a sign of the covenant between God to man. How easy it is for us, in the wake of a remarkable answer to prayer, to forget our dependence upon God.

Sometimes when life is good it's hard to keep God at the center. A lot of times it's easier when life is tough because we're sort of forced to hang onto God.

Well, not Abraham. He had his long-awaited answer to prayer. Now he was going make sure that his utter dependence on God for the future spiritual welfare of that child be acknowledged in the way that God had commanded.

The rite of circumcision wasn't definitely not a pleasant experience. It was a painful for the son. But it was also painful for the father. He was the one who held the knife and did the surgery. But through it Abraham confessed that he was dependent on the grace of God for this child.

Now, we need to understand here, before we move into the second half of the chapter, how excited everyone was about this birth.

In verse 6 we read (6 & 7)

Sarah laughed in unbelief the first time she heard God's promise. She thought it was some kind of cruel joke. But now she was laughing a different kind of laughter.

Hebrews 11:11 says, *By faith Sarah herself also received strength to conceive seed, and she bore a child when she was past the age, because she judged Him faithful who had promised.*

There must have been a lot of laughter going on in Abraham's camp. Remember he has several hundred servants and people traveling with him. I'm sure they all laughed with Sarah.

Of course Sarah wasn't the only one laughing. Abraham was in on it too.

Read verse 8

It was standard practice in the ancient orient to have a party when a child was weaned. But I have to believe that this was an occasion with more than the usual significance.

I can just see Abraham announcing that his little son was the promised seed.

This was the one through whom God would produce a great nation. This was the one in whom all the families of the earth would be blessed.

Everyone was excited. Well, almost everyone.

I. God Fulfills His Grace Promises

II. Grace And Works Are Always In Conflict

Read verse 9

Two weeks ago the cover story in Newsweek was "The Religious Case For Gay Marriage." Actually the article didn't talk about religion in general but tried to prove it's case from the Bible. Of course you can't prove gay marriage from the Bible. What was really telling was a quote they used from a liberal seminary professor who says, "The religious argument for gay marriage is not generally made with reference to particular verses, but with the general conviction that the Bible is bent toward inclusiveness." In other words there are no verses supporting gay marriage.

But this is how the article begins: "Let's try for a minute to take the religious conservatives at their word and define marriage as the Bible does. Shall we look to Abraham, the great patriarch, who slept with his servant when he discovered his beloved wife Sarah was infertile?"

Hello! God didn't include this in the Bible to define marriage. He included it to show us the consequences of going outside the bounds of traditional marriage.

There was a tangled web of trouble that resulted from Abraham's night with the servant girl.

By now Ishmael, Abraham's son by the slave girl Hagar, is old enough to know what is going on.

His father loved him so he was secure in his place in the home until his little brother came along. Suddenly he'd been replaced. Now he mocks Isaac and the Hebrew says "he was continually mocking."

Spirituality isn't hereditary, but carnality is. A child can be born to godly parents but that doesn't automatically give them a spiritual nature.

After a bad start with his birth out of wedlock, Ishmael had a stable, godly upbringing. He had seen his father's godly life. He had heard Abraham's accounts of his encounters with God, he had seen Abraham at prayer, he had even been in the camp when God himself had visited with two angels.

He knew God had promises for him and that Isaac was the promised seed.

But in jealousy and bitterness he poked fun and mocked and gave Isaac a hard time.

Now we don't know what went on in detail but it was enough to cause Sarah to become angrier and angrier.

Finally **verse 10 & 11**

Now I want you to notice something. When Sarah talks about Isaac what does she call him? My son!

When Abraham was distressed about sending Ishmael away what term is used to describe Ishmael? His son. Verse 11.

After all these years Sarah finally had a son. It was her own son. And she was angry because she saw Ishmael, who was not even her blood relative, giving her son a hard time.

But see, Ishmael was Abraham's son and Abraham he loved him. And so Abraham wasn't so happy about the conflict that was going on.

I can't help but wonder how many times over the years Sarah was reminded about Hagar's attitudes toward her. How many times she must have battled with her

feelings of resentment and bitterness.

It's easy fall prey to bitterness in our lives. Sometimes it can go on for years like Sarah's did. Everybody else thinks we are over it. But it doesn't take much to cause those feelings to well up in us again.

Sarah's resentment of Hagar lay buried just below the surface.

When we are in that position we are always vulnerable to the person we are bitter against. In our minds they pose a constant threat.

So here is Sarah, living with her servant girl that she had sent into the bedroom of her own husband to try to provide the child they wanted so desperately. Now her hatred for Hagar and the child she bore is coming out.

Originally it had been Hagar who had despised Sarah. Now it was Ishmael who ridiculed Isaac. And soon Sarah's joy over her son was corrupted by bitterness.

The last time there had been a fight between the two women Abraham had abdicated his authority in the household and let Sarah throw Hagar out.

This time he wasn't going to do that, but interestingly, God comes along and tells him to do what Sarah wants.

Read verses 12 & 13

Even though Sarah's attitude was wrong, she really was acting in consistency with God's own promises and plans.

The first time Sarah wanted to throw out Hagar there were no spiritual implications. Isaac hadn't been born yet.

But now it really was impossible for the son of the promise and the son of the bondwoman to live together under the same roof.

Abraham was going to have to follow Sarah's request this time even though it would go against his own personal feelings. Even though it seems harsh.

Some times it's necessary for God's people, if they are truly going to be in the will of God and enjoy the fullness of God's blessing, to separate completely from those who would constantly oppose spiritual things.

The conflict between Ishmael and Isaac was just beginning.

So God instructed Abraham to send Hagar and Ishmael away. Isaac was the son of the promise and God never intended Ishmael to share in these promises in any way.

Abraham didn't need to fear for Hagar and Ishmael's lives. In fact God promises to make a great nation out of Ishmael.

Now, as your hearing all this you might be thinking what's this? What's the big deal here? Why does God spend so much time telling us this? Why do we have to get into this involved story of conflict and family problems? What in the world does this have to do with us today?

I. God Fulfills His Grace Promises

II. Grace And Works Are Always In Conflict

III. God Always Points Us Back To Grace

Listen this conflict between Sarah and Hagar; between Isaac and Ishmael, has been appropriated in the New Testament as an illustration of the continuing conflict between law and grace; between flesh and spirit.

I suppose that even the most creative and imaginative Bible teachers wouldn't have picked this up.

But God explains it to us.

Turn to Galatians 4 page 1036

This letter to the Galatians was written to correct a problem that had arisen in the church. The Apostle Paul had come to the region of Galatia and led a bunch of Gentiles to faith in Christ. They weren't Jews, they never practiced the law of Moses. They were total, pagans.

The Apostle moves in and tells them about the saving work of Christ. He explains to them how Jesus was God in the flesh who came to earth to die to pay the penalty for man's sins. And many came to Christ. They turned from trusting in idolatry to

trusting in Jesus and were saved,

But soon after that, when Paul moved into another region, Judaizers came in. Judaizers were men who tried to combine Judaism and Christianity in a false way. They said the way to become a Christian was to first become a Jew religiously.

So they told the Galatians that they needed to be circumcised and keep the commandments of Moses along with believing in Christ.

We have our own 21st century forms of this today. People say, "You have to be baptized to be saved, you have to worship on a certain day to really be a Christian, you have to follow a set of rules to be a genuine believer."

Paul wrote Galatians to correct this false teaching and he hit on two areas. #1. What being a Christian is and #2 what living like a Christian is. His conclusion was both of them have nothing to do with the law or with dependence on human accomplishment.

Probably the last place most of us would look for this truth would be Genesis 21 but that is exactly where God directs us to prove his point.

The Judaizers drew their teachings heavily from the Old Testament so Paul takes them right into Genesis.

Read 4:21 - 25

He says, first of all, look at Hagar. Hagar was a bond woman, a slave. She represents Mt. Sinai. What happened on Mt. Sinai? The commandments were given to Moses. That is the origin of the law.

The Judaizers, like many today, were saying it is by the keeping of the law of God that a man is saved.

Their headquarters was Jerusalem. Paul says Hagar represents Mt. Sinai, represents Jerusalem, represents the old covenant, represents the law. That law that is being taught by the Judaizers as the way of salvation and spirituality.

If Paul were teaching us today, he might say Hagar represents Mecca, home of Islam or Brooklyn, home of the Watch Tower Society or even Salt Lake City, the home of

Mormonism.

The names change but the underlying religion is the same. It's man's religion of good works and human effort. It is saying that God forgives those who do enough good things to outweigh their bad and please God.

Any system of human merit is represented by Hagar.

Now the offspring of Hagar was Ishmael. Ishmael was outside of God's covenant of blessing. Because Ishmael was born of a slave he was a slave himself. Ishmael represents all those who follow the religion of man.

Because everyone who tries to be saved by works is in bondage. They are slaves they can do good works, until the day they die but if they are not part of God's covenant they are enslaved, in bondage to the penalty of sin, still standing under the judgment of God.

But now, Paul says to the Galatians, take Sarah. **Read verse 26**

Sarah was the freewoman. She wasn't a slave. And what does she represent? Heaven. The Jerusalem which is above.

Who's in the that New Jerusalem? Hebrews 12 says, angels, believers of all ages, and Jesus Christ. Sarah represents the source of God's free salvation. Not something that can be earned but justification by faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ.

One is law and works and one is grace and faith. Now Sarah had a son, Isaac. Isaac comes under the covenant blessings of God. Isaac is the free man in contrast to Ishmael the man in bondage.

And the New Testament pulls this all together for us by giving us 3 applications from this allegory.

#1 - verse 28

The birth of Isaac is an illustration of the birth of a Christian.

How was Isaac born?

Not by anything of the flesh. Abraham was stricken with age. Sarah was 90 and past the time when physical conception would be possible.

Isaac was born by nothing of the flesh. And just as Sarah was barren all of her life and incapable of giving birth to a son- so is everyone who ever lived on this earth incapable of giving themselves a new birth, a spiritual birth.

How did Isaac's birth come about? It was a work of God which he sovereignly chose to do in response to Sarah and Abraham's faith.

How does our spiritual birth come about which makes us a child of God? John 3:36.
He that believes on the Son, has everlasting life.

The first application is, our relationship with God is a work of God by grace, not a work that we do.

The second application is given in **verse 29**

The persecution of Isaac by Ishmael, the mocking of the free born child of the promise by the child of Abraham's works, is a picture of the conflict between law and grace.

The teaching of grace always triggers hostility and ridicule from the followers of law.

Just like it happened in Genesis 21, just like it happened in Galatia, it happens today.

If you consistently try to share your faith with others you'll get some real opposition from people along the way.

If you tell them they're saved by grace through faith you'll be accused of preaching "easy believism," "cheap grace," "a watered down gospel."

And you'll have opposition from everyone from the cultist who says salvation comes by joining their group and following their dictates, to the Lordship Salvationist who says you have to turn from your sins and makes Jesus Lord of all before God will accept you.

Then finally the third application is in **verse 30**.

What Abraham did was exactly what we have to do. Legalism with all its implications, needs to be cast out of our lives.

These Galatians became Christians by faith and now they were attempting to please God by keeping the law.

Galatians calls that “falling from grace” in chapter 5. That’s not losing your salvation, it is failing to stand firm in your liberty and moving down into bondage.

Legalism can't exist with faith and grace in the life of a believer.

The most important lesson you can learn as a Christian is this: God doesn't show his favor to you because you have earned it. You can't earn God's love by good works.

We do good works because God has already shown us his favor in Jesus Christ.

Maybe you need to cast the bondswoman and her son out of your life today.

If you have trusted Christ as Savior but you still think that God loves you when your good and doesn't when your bad, then you don't understand the full effects of what Jesus did for you.

And until you understand that God is love and His favor, His grace, can't be earned, you'll be defeated and miserable because you miss the true source of it all.

God's love, his favor and his grace was earned for you through Jesus Christ. Rejoice in that and the joy of the Lord will truly be your strength.