

Genesis 21:1-31 • Testing Family Relationships

Introduction

True, biblical faith is always tested, and although the most famous test to come with which most are familiar is provided in the next chapter, it is actually preceded by a pair of tests in this chapter leading up to it. It is not unusual for faith to undergo a series of lesser tests building up to the ultimate one to come. They are intended by God to prepare and strengthen for what is inevitable and cannot be avoided. The Prophet Daniel was not thrown into the lion's den on day one, but was experienced many years of a life of demonstrated and increasing obedience to God's Word and ways. Likewise is this commonly found among every believer to some degree. Most often, before a personal testing with God can take place, the initial rounds are with the people around us. If we cannot successfully navigate the testing of our earthly relationships, we will not be successful when it comes to the heavenly.

¹Then the LORD took note of Sarah as He had said, and the LORD did for Sarah as He had promised. ²So Sarah conceived and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the appointed time of which God had spoken to him. ³Abraham called the name of his son who was born to him, whom Sarah bore to him, Isaac. ⁴Then Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him.

⁵Now Abraham was one hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. ⁶Sarah said, "God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me." ⁷And she said, "Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age."

⁸The child grew and was weaned, and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned.

[Read v.1-8]

Q: What might be significant about naming their son "laughter"?

A: It follows a sequence documented in Scripture:

1. "Then **Abraham fell on his face and laughed**, and said in his heart, 'Will a child be born to a man one hundred years old? And will Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?'" (Gen. 17:17)
2. "**Sarah laughed to herself**, saying, 'After I have become old, shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?'" (Gen. 18:12)
3. "Sarah said, "**God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me.**" (Gen. 21:6)

Point: God turned the laughter of unbelief into the laughter of faith.

Q: What might be considered divinely ironic about Abraham's age when Isaac was born?

A: When Abraham first heard of it in Genesis 17:17, he jested, "Will a child be born a man one hundred years old?", and that is exactly what happened.

Observation: It is interesting to note that in Genesis 20:7, God specifically called Abraham "a prophet".

Q: What is this event taking place at this time in their lives specifically called? When did it occur from the divine point of view?

A: "...at the appointed time of which God had spoken..." (v.2)

Q: How do we know that this came about not by Abraham's strength, but due to God's promise and power? Is it just because the birth took place when they old beyond normal childbearing years?

For this reason it is by faith, in order that it may be in accordance with grace, so that the promise will be guaranteed to all the descendants, not only to those who are of the Law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all, (as it is written, "A FATHER OF MANY NATIONS HAVE I MADE YOU") in the presence of Him whom he believed, even God, who gives life to the dead and calls into being that which does not exist. In hope against hope he believed, so that he might become a father of many nations according to that which had been spoken, "SO SHALL YOUR DESCENDANTS BE." Without becoming weak in faith he contemplated his own body, now as good as dead since he was about a hundred years old, and the deadness of Sarah's womb; yet, with respect to the promise of God, he did not waver in unbelief but grew strong in

faith, giving glory to God, and being fully assured that what God had promised, He was able also to perform. Therefore IT WAS ALSO CREDITED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS. — Romans 4:16–22

Application: Without true faith, there is no true righteousness. The fulfillment of God's promises come at the appointed time in order to allow a greater work of faith producing righteousness in our life.

⁹Now Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, mocking. ¹⁰Therefore 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."

¹¹The matter distressed Abraham greatly because of his son. ¹²But 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. ¹³And of the son of the maid I will make a nation also, because he is your descendant."

[Read v.9-13]

Q: How was Abraham previously tested by family relationships?

1. He had been tested in his relationship with his father. (Gen. 11:27-32)
2. He had been tested in his relationship with Lot.(Gen. 12-13)
3. He had been tested in his relationship with his wife. (Gen. 16)

Q: How will this test come about yet again?

A: Abraham will be tested not just through Hagar and Sarah, but through his two sons.

Q: How old is Ishmael when Isaac was born?

A: According to Genesis 16:16, Abraham was 86 when Ishmael was born, so Ishmael would have been 14 or 15 at this time.

Q: Why did this conflict seem inevitable? What is the greater spiritual difference between the births of Ishmael and Isaac?

A: Ishmael was a product of the flesh—that is, man's will to please himself; Isaac was the "son of promise", a product of the Spirit by the promise of God.

Q: So what is probable the true source of the conflict? Is it merely a dispute for whose son will be the primary heir to Abraham?

A: The underlying problem is that the birth of Ishmael is rooted in the "old nature"—that is the flesh to satiate man's desire, but the birth of Isaac is representative of the "new nature" which operates according to God's desire. There is a much greater unaddressed spiritual conflict at the heart of these issues.

Q: Why might God's further promise and instruction be surprising to Abraham?

A: His natural inclination is to work things out. Instead, the solution for all parties involved is going to be separation.

Q: How does God's promise to Abraham concerning Hagar and Ishmael confirm this?

A: God will not only take care of them, but will bless this son as well in the same way God has promised to bless Isaac.

Point: Notice that the issue is not limited to a single heir to Abraham, but has to do with the nations which will come through Isaac and the nations which will come through Ishmael.

Q: What is the biblical solution for dealing with the old nature? Can it be improved or disciplined so as to reconcile it with our new nature in Christ?

A: According to Romans 6-7, the only solution is crucifixion—that is, considering ourselves dead to the old nature. We need to leave the old nature behind in pursuit of the new nature through obedience to God's Word and ways.

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But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regard to its lusts. — Romans 13:14

Application: When one side of a relationship is hopelessly rooted in the flesh and the other steadfast in the Spirit, separation is required that God may properly work on both independently.

¹⁴So 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.

¹⁵When the water in the skin was used up, she left the boy under one of the bushes. ¹⁶Then 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.

¹⁷God 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. ¹⁸Arise, lift up the lad, and hold him by the hand, for I will make a great nation of him.” ¹⁹Then 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.

²⁰God was with the lad, and he grew; and he lived in the wilderness and became an archer. ²¹He lived in the wilderness of Paran, and his mother took a wife for him from the land of Egypt.

[Read v.14-21]

Q: Why should it not surprise us that God intervened on Hagar’s and Ishmael’s behalf?

A: God not only made a promise to Sarah, but to Hagar as well.

Moreover, the angel of the LORD said to her, “I will greatly multiply your descendants so that they will be too many to count.” — Genesis 16:10

Q: But what else was included in that revelation to Hagar from the Lord?

The angel of the LORD said to her further,

“Behold, you are with child,
And you will bear a son;
And you shall call his name Ishmael,
Because the LORD has given heed to your affliction.
He will be a wild donkey of a man,
His hand will be against everyone,
And everyone’s hand will be against him;
And he will live to the east of all his brothers.”— Genesis 16:11–12

Not only was the separation from Abraham and Sarah predicted—“he will live to the east of all his brothers”, but the continuing conflict between their descendants—“his hand will be against everyone, and everyone’s hand will be against him”.

Q: On what particular occasion was this promise made? How did Hagar originally respond?

A: She was “fleeing from the presence of my mistress Sarai” (Gen. 16:8). When given this promise...

Then she called the name of the LORD who spoke to her, “You are a God who sees”; for she said, “Have I even remained alive here after seeing Him?” Therefore the well was called Beer-lahai-roi; behold, it is between Kadesh and Bered. — Genesis 16:13–14

Q: What was she told to do?

A: “...Return to your mistress, and submit to her authority”. (Gen. 16:9)

Q: What is the difference between that first situation and the one Hagar finds herself in now?

A: She must still submit to Sarah’s authority. It was not until both had a son that irreconcilable conflict ensued.

Application: God had his own plan and appointed time for Hagar, which was not compatible with Abraham’s. Hagar and Ishmael were also chosen by God, but had to pursue their own choices by faith.

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²¹Tell me, you who want to be under law, do you not listen to the law? ²²For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the bondwoman and one by the free woman. ²³But the son by the bondwoman was born according to the flesh, and the son by the free woman through the promise. ²⁴This is allegorically speaking, for these women are two covenants: one proceeding from Mount Sinai bearing children who are to be slaves; she is Hagar. ²⁵Now this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. ²⁶But the Jerusalem above is free; she is our mother. ²⁷For it is written,

“REJOICE, BARREN WOMAN WHO DOES NOT BEAR;
BREAK FORTH AND SHOUT, YOU WHO ARE NOT IN LABOR;
FOR MORE NUMEROUS ARE THE CHILDREN OF THE DESOLATE THAN OF THE ONE WHO HAS A HUSBAND.”

²⁸And you brethren, like Isaac, are children of promise. ²⁹But as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so it is now also. ³⁰But what does the Scripture say?

“CAST OUT THE BONDWOMAN AND HER SON,
FOR THE SON OF THE BONDWOMAN SHALL NOT BE AN HEIR WITH THE SON OF THE FREE WOMAN.”

³¹So then, brethren, we are not children of a bondwoman, but of the free woman.

[Read Galatians 4:21-31]

Q: What is the greater spiritual issue these figures represent?

A: Hagar and her son represent the Old Covenant, while Sarah and her son the New Covenant.

Q: What are some of the contrasts listed between each of them, and how do they represent the working of the Old Covenant versus the New Covenant?

- Hagar represents the Old Covenant of the law, associated with the earthly Jerusalem of Paul's day.
- Sarah represents the New Covenant of grace, associated with the heavenly Jerusalem.
- Ishmael, the son of a slave, was born of the flesh.
- Isaac, the son of a freewoman, was born of the Spirit.
- Ishmael is a picture of Old Testament Israel under slavery to the Law.
- Isaac is a picture of the New Testament Church under the liberty of grace.

Q: So what is Paul saying the greater meaning is for us today in God's command to cast out Hagar?

A: Christians today are not under the law, a more detailed explanation of which is provided in Galatians 3-4.

Application: *Just as the old nature is incompatible with the new nature and separation needs to take place, so we are no longer under the Law so that the New Covenant of promise is to be exclusively pursued.*

Overall Application

As challenging and difficult as these trials within Abraham's own family were to overcome, it was actually preparing him for the ultimate test yet to come when he would have to completely give up Isaac. Likewise we will engage in spiritual tests which are preparing us for the major ones only the Lord foresees on the horizon. Just as there were greater spiritual meanings of what literally took place, so will it be for each of us, in our own way, according to God's appointed time.