Sunday January 9, 2022

Lesson: Genesis 21:8-20; Time of Action: about 2062 B.C.; Place of Action: Canaan

Golden Text: “And God heard the voice of the lad; and the angel of God called to Hagar out of heaven, and said unto her, What aileth thee, Hagar? fear not; for God hath heard the voice of the lad where he is. Arise, lift up the lad, and hold him in thine hand; for I will make him a great nation” (Genesis 21:17-18).

I. INTRODUCTION. Staying faithful when everything is going well for us is easy. But staying faithful to God in turbulent times, as we find Abraham doing in our lesson this week is hard. His wife and her handmaid were quarreling with each other, and Abraham’s heart was torn between the two sons he had, Ishmael and Isaac. Our lesson this week shows how God can use strife-ridden situations and turn them around for any chosen and faithful person. Abraham is that person in our lesson.

II. LESSON BACKGROUND. Twenty-five years passed between the time that Abraham was promised he would become a “great nation” (see Genesis 12:2) and the birth of Isaac, the son of promise (see Genesis 12:4; 21:5). As the
years passed, Abraham and his wife Sarah thought that God might have another plan in mind that did not include having their own natural-born son. One possibility they thought was that Eliezer, Abraham’s steward (see Genesis 15:2-3) might be the means of carrying on Abraham’s name and fulfilling God’s promise. However, concerning Abraham’s steward Eliezer, God said “This shall not be thine heir, but he that shall come forth out of thine own bowels shall be thine heir” (see Genesis 15:4). Again as the years passed, the possibility of Sarah having a son seemed more and more unlikely. Finally, after living in Canaan for ten years (see Genesis 16:3), Sarah suggested that Abraham have a child by her Egyptian maidservant, Hagar (see Genesis 16:1-2). Archaeological discoveries indicate that this was a common practice when a man’s wife was childless. While Abraham agreed to go along with Sarah’s suggestion, this was not what God had in mind. Even so, “Hagar bare Abram a son and Abram called his son’s name, which Hagar bare, Ishmael” (see Genesis 16:16) which means “God hears.” But being true to His word, God kept His promise and enabled Sarah to conceive a child in her old age. So when Abraham was one hundred years old (see Genesis 21:5) and Sarah was ninety (see Genesis 17:17), they became the parents of Isaac. Our lesson begins after Sarah laughed with amazement that she could give Abraham a son in his old age (see Genesis 21:6-7). Witnessing the mocking of her son, Sarah demanded that Abraham “cast out this bondwoman and her son” and declared that “the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son even with Isaac” (see Genesis 21:10). This is where our lesson begins.
III. THE DEPARTURE OF HAGAR AND ISHMAEL (Genesis 21:8-14)

A. Isaac is weaned (Genesis 21:8). Our first verse says “And the child grew, and was weaned: and Abraham made a great feast the same day that Isaac was weaned.” The word “weaned” refers to the age when a child no longer depends on his or her mother’s breast milk to sustain them. On the “same day” when “Isaac was weaned,” or stopped feeding on his mother’s breast milk, at about three or four years old, “Abraham” gave “a great feast” to celebrate the occasion. Ishmael would have been about seventeen at the time “Isaac was weaned” (see Genesis 16:16; 17:25; 21:5).

B. Isaac is mocked (Genesis 24:9). This verse says “And Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, which she had born unto Abraham, mocking.” At some point either during the feast or sometime later, “Sarah saw” Ishmael “the son of Hagar the Egyptian, which she had born unto Abraham, mocking” or making fun of Isaac. It is not clear whether “Sarah” witnessed Ishmael “mocking” Isaac on one occasion or it had become normal behavior for Ishmael to mistreat his younger brother. At any rate, “Sarah” took notice of Ishmael “mocking” Isaac. Note: Centuries later the Apostle Paul would refer to this incident when describing believers as children of promise and unbelievers as born after the flesh. Paul declared that Ishmael, who was born after the flesh,
persecuted Isaac, who was born after the Spirit and that same persecution continues today against believers, children born after the Spirit (see Galatians 4:29).

C. Sarah’s reaction (Genesis 21:10). This verse says “Wherefore she said unto Abraham, Cast out this bondwoman and her son: for the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son, even with Isaac.” Witnessing the mocking of her son, Sarah demanded that “Abraham cast out this bondwoman and her son.” She also declared that “the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son even with Isaac.” In Genesis 16:1-3, Hagar is described as Sarah’s “handmaid,” but here Sarah refers to her as “this bondwoman” or “this slave woman.” In her anger, Sarah stresses Hagar’s servile status—a slave—which was an indication of the animosity and hatred that existed between these two rivals (see Genesis 16:3-6). Although Sarah’s demand for Abraham to “cast out this bondwoman and her son” was spoken in anger, it is quoted in Galatians 4:30 as if her words had been spoken by a spirit of prophecy. But of course, she had no idea that her words would be echoed centuries later as part of Paul’s message to the Galatians confirming that the law (represented by Ishmael) and grace (represented by Isaac) cannot co-exist (see Galatians 4:22-23, 30). Yes, spurred by anger, Sarah told “Abraham” that Hagar and Ishmael had to go because “the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son, even with Isaac.” There was no way that Sarah was going to stand by and watch her “son” Isaac share “Abraham’s” inheritance with Ishmael who made fun
of her “son” and whose mother Hagar despised Sarah (see Genesis 16:4-5). **Note:** In ancient times, it was common for the first born son to receive a double portion of his father’s inheritance, but it is not unusual for God to choose the second born instead of putting His greatest blessing on the first born. God rejected Cain and chose Abel (see Genesis 4:1-15). He bypassed Esau, Isaac’s firstborn, and chose Jacob (see Romans 9:8-13), and He chose Ephraim instead of Manasseh (see Genesis 48:8-14). Here we see that Ishmael was born first, because the natural comes before the spiritual (see I Corinthians 15:46).

D. Abraham is distressed (Genesis 21:11-13).

1. (vs. 11). This verse says “And the thing was very grievous in Abraham’s sight because of his son.” The words “And the thing” refers back to Sarah’s demand for “Abraham” to cast out Hagar and Ishmael in verse 10. What his wife asked him to do “was very grievous in Abraham’s sight because of his son.” It grieved “Abraham” that Ishmael’s behavior toward Isaac had led to such a request from Sarah. No doubt “Abraham” had become attached to Ishmael over the past sixteen years or so. Ishmael was about seventeen years old at this time and Isaac was about four years old. Because of his love for Ishmael, “Abraham” was greatly distressed at the thought of sending him away from his home into an uncertain world. Parents can certainly identify with the emotional turmoil of finding themselves in such a dilemma.
2. (vs. 12). This verse says “And God said unto Abraham, Let it not be grievous in thy sight because of the lad, and because of thy bondwoman; in all that Sarah hath said unto thee, hearken unto her voice; for in Isaac shall thy seed be called.” Seeing the predicament that “Abraham” was in, “God” in His mercy said to him “Let it not be grievous in thy sight because of the lad, and because of thy bondwoman.” The LORD told “Abraham” not to be grieved or distressed because of Ishmael and Hagar, his slave-girl wife. Then “God” said “for in all that Sarah hath said unto thee, hearken unto her voice; for in Isaac shall thy seed be called.” The LORD commanded “Abraham” to do what “Sarah” wanted him to do because “in Isaac shall thy seed be called.” In other words, “Abraham” should only be concerned about “Isaac” because he was the promised “seed” or son of promise not Ishmael. It was God’s plan to use “Isaac” to expand and bless Abraham’s descendants. There was a major difference between “Isaac” and Ishmael. In Paul’s letter to the believers in Galatia, he indicated that “Isaac” was the “son of promise” and Ishmael was “born after the flesh” (see Galatians 2:28-29). As emotionally hard as it would be for “Abraham” to listen to “Sarah” and do as she demanded, this was God’s plan. Many of us have come to realize through difficulty that God does not always take us on the easy path, but instead He expects us to follow His will in spite of how hard it might be, but it is the way to eventual joy and blessing.

3. (vs. 13). This verse says “And also of the son of the bondwoman will I make a nation, because he is
thy seed.” God also reassured Abraham that He would bless Ishmael. God said to Abraham “And also of the son of the bondwoman will I make a nation.” The LORD had earlier told Abraham that He would “multiply” Ishmael and “make him a great nation” (see Genesis 17:20). Now God reaffirmed that promise saying “I (will) make a nation...of the son (Ishmael) of the bondwoman (Hagar).” The LORD told Abraham that He would do this because Ishmael “is thy seed” or descendant. In essence, God would make Ishmael a large nation because of Abraham. **Note:** Ishmael is considered to be the father of the Arab peoples, the traditional enemies of the Jewish people. Muhammad, the founder of Islam, whose followers form Christianity’s most difficult missionary problem, came from the line of Ishmael. Islam is the world religion which is probably the closest to Christianity; therefore it is the hardest religion to penetrate with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Both the Jews and the Arabs claim to be descendants of Abraham, and the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East today originate from the competing claims made by these descendants of Abraham.

E. Hagar and Ishmael banished (Genesis 21:14). This verse says “And Abraham rose up early in the morning, and took bread, and a bottle of water, and gave it unto Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, and the child, and sent her away: and she departed, and wandered in the wilderness of Beersheba.” As soon as “Abraham” perceives that sending “Hagar” and Ishmael away was the will of God, he makes no objections, but silently does as he was told. Although what he was about to do must
have thrown his emotions into turmoil, “Abraham” proceeded to carry out the request made by Sarah and confirmed by God. We are told that “Abraham rose up early in the morning, and took bread, and a bottle of water, and gave it unto Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, and the child, and sent her away: and she departed, and wandered in the wilderness of Beersheba.” The patriarch got up early the next morning and gave “Hagar” some “bread, and a bottle of water.” The “water bottle” was most likely a large skin that should have supplied their needs for several days until they would come upon an oasis or some other source of water. “Abraham” put those provisions “on her shoulder, and the child, and sent her away: and she departed, and wandered in the wilderness of Beersheba.” This bondwoman and her son were now wandering around in the “wilderness” or desert “of Beersheba” which was at the southernmost end of Canaan and was mostly desert. By sending “Hagar” and Ishmael away, God made sure that since Isaac, the promised son had arrived, the potential threat to Abraham’s inheritance by Ishmael was removed.

IV. THE DISTRESS OF HAGAR AND ISHMAEL (Genesis 21:15-16)

A. Hagar and Ishmael run out of provisions (Genesis 21:15). This verse says “And the water was spent in the bottle, and she cast the child under one of the shrubs.” After Hagar was sent off wandering in the
desert of Beer-sheba, finding sustenance for their survival in this environment would have been difficult to say the least. We see this in the fact that at some point “the water was spent in the bottle.” They had run out of “water.” To protect her son from the heat and to avoid further dehydration, Hagar “cast (or put) the child under one of the shrubs” or bushes. Even on the hottest days the shade from a tree or bush can provide some relief (see Jonah 4:5-6). Although Ishmael is described as a “child,” he was really a teenager when this event took place (see comments on verse 8). The word translated “child” can refer to a fetus (see Exodus 21:22), newborn children (see I Kings 17:17-23), or even young adults (see Daniel 1:3-8). In this verse, it refers to a boy of at least fifteen years old.

B. Hagar avoids watching her son suffer (Genesis 21:16). This verse says “And she went, and sat her down over against him a good way off, as it were a bow shot: for she said, Let me not see the death of the child. And she sat over against him, and lift up her voice, and wept.” Now that all the water was gone (see verse 15), Hagar could expect nothing but “the death” of her son. Unable to bear the thought of watching her son die in the desert heat, this verse says “And she went, and sat her down over against him a good way off, as it were a bow shot: for she said, Let me not see the death of the child.” Hagar went about “a bow shot” away, maybe about 100 yards or so opposite from her son. Then she lifted “up her voice, and wept” probably bursting into tears, and sobbing wildly. Note: In an earlier similar episode (see Genesis 16:5-11), before Ishmael was born (see Genesis...
16:4), Hagar ran away from Sarah, but was later rescued by the Angel of the LORD. At that time, God promised her that He would multiply her son’s descendants into a multitude (see Genesis 16:10). However, under the present circumstances, Hagar was probably wondering whether that would come to pass or not. But it is more likely that she had forgotten the promise that God made to her. Let’s be real; even as Christians, we humans are apt to forget God’s former promises, especially when our present circumstances seem to contradict them, for unfortunately we tend to live by sense instead of by faith.

V. THE DELIVERANCE OF HAGAR AND ISHMAEL (Genesis 21:17-21)

A. The LORD hears Ishmael’s cries (Genesis 21:17-18).

1. (vs. 17). This verse says “And God heard the voice of the lad; and the angel of God called to Hagar out of heaven, and said unto her, What aileth thee, Hagar? fear not; for God hath heard the voice of the lad where he is.” In their distress, “God” graciously appeared to give them relief. “God heard the voice of the lad.” We don’t read of any words Ishmael might have uttered if any, but certainly his sighs, and groans, and serious condition, cried aloud to the ears of the “God” of mercy. Note: It may very well be that Ishmael, now about seventeen years
old, was calling upon the LORD. It is highly likely that as Abraham’s son Ishmael had some understanding of Abraham’s “God.” So it would not be a great reach to think that some of the great faith of Abraham had taken hold in Ishmael during the time he was with his father. Indeed “God” hears the prayers of those who cry out to Him in times of trouble (see Psalms 50:15). Of course, there is no assurance that answered prayer is given to those who willfully reject “God” and live in disobedience to His will (see Psalms 66:18; Proverbs 15:29; Isaiah 59:1-2; James 5:16). Obviously, it was God’s will to respond to the cries of Ishmael and rescue him. However, “God” may not always deliver us from our dilemmas. Sometimes He gives us wisdom to understand our troubles. He may even use them to bring us to heaven (see Acts 7:55-60; 12:1-2; Philippians 1:23). In response to the cries of Ishmael, “the angel of God called to Hagar out of heaven, and said unto her, What aileth thee, Hagar? fear not.” God, appearing to “Hagar” again in a theophany (see Genesis 16:7), spoke to her and asked what was troubling her and told her not to be afraid. The LORD sent the “angel of God” to comfort her. Often when we are going through troubling times, “God” has to quiet our fears and calm us down before we can truly hear His words. Over and over again in the Scriptures, “God” commands those who are troubled to “fear not.” Although “Hagar” and Ishmael were on the verge of dying of thirst, the LORD stepped in. Truly, “God” is never early, or late: He’s always right on time. The reason “Hagar” was not to be afraid was as “the angel” said, “for God hath heard the voice of the lad where he is.” It
didn’t matter that Ishmael was in the desert or anywhere else, because the heavenly messenger declared that “God...heard the voice of the lad where he is.” The LORD always knows where we are (see Psalms 139:1-12).

**Note:** God originally named Ishmael when Hagar had fled from Sarah and He found her in the wilderness on the way to Shur (see Genesis 16:7-11). The name “Ishmael” means “God hears.” Hagar was told to use this name because God was hearing the anguish of her heart and responding to it. Now again, God was hearing and responding, assuring her that she did not need to fear for her son. “God had heard” him and was aware of his condition and position at that very moment.

2. (vs. 18). This verse says “Arise, lift up the lad, and hold him in thine hand; for I will make him a great nation.” After reassuring Hagar, the angel of God (God in angelic form) told her to “Arise, lift up the lad, and hold him in thine hand.” She was to get up “lift” Ishmael up from his place of distress and “hold him” in her arms. Once again, Hagar was given the promise: “for I will make him a great nation.” Her son was not going to die, but he would live and become the beginning of an entire family group of his own—the Arab nation. **Note:** What we have here in the “angel of God” is a “Theophany” which is an appearance of God in a visible form to man. Literally, this appearance of God is a “Christophany,” meaning that this is one of many occasions in the Old Testament when Jesus appeared to individuals before He became flesh and was born in Bethlehem. There were many of
these appearances of Christ in the Old Testament (see Genesis 16:6-11; chapter 18; Exodus 3:1-12; Numbers 22:22-35; Joshua 5:13-15; Judges 2:1-5; 13:3-22). More often than not, whenever this “angel” appears, He speaks as God saying “I will do this, or I will do that.” No mere “angel” can speak as God. They can only say what God directs them to say. Therefore, this was a pre-incarnate appearance of Jesus Christ who is the visible God.

B. God opens Hagar’s eyes (Genesis 21:19-20).

1. (vs. 19). This verse says “And God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water; and she went, and filled the bottle with water, and gave the lad drink.” Since “God” knows our needs before we ask (see Matthew 6:8), He makes provisions for those needs to be met ahead of time. While Hagar may have thought that they had been aimlessly wandering in the desert, they were actually being led to the very place where their needs would be met. At the same time, “God” was telling Hagar to get up and do something, “God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water.” When the LORD “opened her eyes” she could see the provision He was making for her and her son. She suddenly realized that there was “a well of water” nearby. Sometimes we are so wounded by our circumstances that we can’t see what “God” has in store for us. It’s only when He opens our “eyes” that we can see His remedy for our troubles. We will often find that the answer to most of our problems is close at hand, if only we have “eyes” to see (see John 6:1-13; 21:1-6). Then “she went, and filled the bottle
with water, and gave the lad drink” to quench his thirst. Once again, the LORD had met her needs.

2. (vs. 20). Our final verse says “And God was with the lad; and he grew, and dwelt in the wilderness, and became an archer.” The fact that “God was with the lad” refers to the promise that He made to bless Ishmael (see Genesis 17:20). All we are told about Ishmael here is that “he grew, and dwelt in the wilderness, and became an archer.” Hagar and Ishmael settled “in the wilderness” which refers to the unpopulated region of the desert of Paran, southwest of Beersheba. As Ishmael “grew” he “became an archer” or a bow hunter. This allowed him to hunt and provide food for himself and his mother. **Note:** While very little is known about the rest of Ishmael’s life, Scripture does tell us that he lived to be 137 and was the father of twelve tribes (see Genesis 25:12-17), the same number of tribes that would come from Abraham’s posterity through his grandson Jacob who also had twelve sons who became tribes (see Genesis 49:1-28; Joshua 4:8; I Kings 18:31). However, an earlier prophecy about Ishmael said that he would be “a wild man; his hand would be against every man and every man’s hand against him” (see Genesis 16:12). His descendants, the Ishmaelites, are said to be hostile toward Israel and God (see Psalms 83:4-7).

**VI. Conclusion.** In this lesson, we have seen how Abraham’s life turned around when he chose to obey God
under all circumstances and realized that His plans for him were best. God has special plans for each of us. He even has special plans for those we don’t even like or love us. We saw this in Sarah’s encounter with Hagar and Ishmael. When we look to God, we will see that He can take our worst situations and use them for our good and for His glory (see Romans 8:28).

***The Sunday School Lesson; The International Sunday School Lesson Curriculum***