Children of the Bible
Lesson 2
Ishmael—the Unwanted Child

Lesson Text
Genesis 16:2-4
2 And Sarai said unto Abram, Behold now, the LORD hath restrained me from bearing: I pray thee, go in unto my maid; it may be that I may obtain children by her. And Abram hearkened to the voice of Sarai.
3 And Sarai Abram’s wife took Hagar her maid the Egyptian, after Abram had dwelt ten years in the land of Canaan, and gave her to her husband Abram to be his wife.
4 And he went in unto Hagar, and she conceived: and when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress was despised in her eyes.

Genesis 21:9-14, 17-18, 20
9 And Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, which she had born unto Abraham, mocking.
10 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.
11 And the thing was very grievous in Abraham’s sight because of his son.
12 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.
13 And also of the son of the bondwoman will I make a nation, because he is thy seed.
14 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 Beer-sheba.

17 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.
18 Arise, lift up the lad, and hold him in thine hand; for I will make him a great nation.

20 And God was with the lad; and he grew, and dwelt in the wilderness, and became an archer.

Focus Verse
Genesis 21:13
And also of the son of the bondwoman will I make a nation, because he is thy seed.

Focus Thought
God’s mercy and compassion can turn our mistakes into blessings when we come to Him with a penitent heart.
Culture Connection
Breaking the Generational Chain
by Gary Erickson

Studies show that children from broken homes generally experience lower achievement than the children of intact families. There are exceptions. It is surprising how many broken homes, and even abusive homes, produce achievers. It is as if the struggles of youth develop a drive in some to achieve against all odds. Bill Clinton’s stepfather was an abusive alcoholic, and Barack Obama’s father abandoned him at a young age. His mother was absent much of the time, and he was raised by his grandparents.

It is true that our upbringing has a profound effect on our behavior. Alcoholics tend to have children who are alcoholics. Sexually abused children often become abusers as well. But we do not have to accept these inherited flaws. We can break these generational chains. With God’s help we can break away from our past. We are new creations in Christ Jesus (II Corinthians 5:17). The gospel is about restoration of the mind and spirit.

The Hindus have what is called the “caste system.” This system breaks the population into hereditary groups called jatis. In some rural parts of India this system is radically followed. A person cannot move from his or her cultural stratum. This is bondage and discrimination. We are all children of God, equal in His sight. “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son” (John 3:16, emphasis mine). All of us are God’s wanted children!

Lesson Outline
I. CIRCUMSTANCES PRECEDING THE BIRTH OF ISHMAEL
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   B. Sarah’s Regret
   C. Abraham’s Dilemma
   D. Intervention by God
II. THE BIRTH OF ISHMAEL
III. DYSFUNCTION IN ABRAHAM’S HOUSE
   A. The Mocking Son
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IV. GOD, THE ANSWER

Contemplating the Topic
This second lesson in Children of the Bible pertains to a child born by the design of the matriarch Sarah in an effort to obtain an heir and son of promise for Abraham by giving him an Egyptian slave girl named Hagar. The delicate relationship of love, mutual respect, and trust in the household was stretched to the limit as a result of the success of the plan. When Sarah’s son, Isaac, finally arrived, the son of promise and Abraham’s
rightful heir, things in the household reached a tense climax. Sarah did not want the surrogate son, Ishmael, and demanded that he and Hagar be cast out.

It is possible that a lack of self-esteem in one child fostered by parental favoritism for another may lead to hate or sibling rivalry. For example, Joseph’s brothers reacted with cruelty toward him because of the favor he received from their father Jacob. Open familial contention often results in aggressive behavior in the one who perceives himself in the role of the unwanted child or “black sheep.” The story of Ishmael not only offers lessons on reconciling conflict in family relationships, but on another level, Paul used the story as an allegory in Galatians 4:21-31 to contrast the Law with grace, and flesh with the Spirit.

Searching the Scriptures
I. CIRCUMSTANCES PRECEDING THE BIRTH OF ISHMAEL

God had promised Abraham a homeland and an heir, a son by Sarah (Genesis 13:16; 15:4). The promise of a homeland had been followed immediately by a sign of sacrifice and prophecy (Genesis 15:7-14), but this promise of a son included neither a sign of sacrifice nor a definite prophecy; Abraham and Sarah had to take the promise on faith. They probably talked and dreamed of the arrival of this son, but their disappointment mounted as month after month no sign of fulfillment materialized. Sarah’s patience snapped as she realized she was too old to bear a child. Instead, she conceived a plan for Abraham to get his son of promise.

A. Sarah’s Plan and Abraham’s Mistake

Sarah’s solution to the problem was legal and not uncommon in their day. A favorite slave girl became a concubine, or surrogate mother, to bear a son who would then be adopted by the matriarch as her own. During their sojourn into Egypt the aging couple had acquired a slave girl named Hagar. Instead of waiting on God to fulfill His promise, Sarah persuaded Abraham to obtain the child by her Egyptian maid.

Even though Abraham and Sarah’s violation of God’s law was probably not deliberate, it was a mistake from the beginning. First, it violated the concept of monogamous marriage, which had been instituted from the beginning (Genesis 2:24). Second, it introduced polygamy into the covenant lineage, a practice which invariably caused family problems. Third, use of another human being who was compelled to do as demanded by her mistress was a sinful action even though it was culturally accepted in their day. Worst of all, the plan was a poor substitute for the miraculous, and it asked God to fulfill His promise through human convention.

As God’s covenant man, Abraham should have been wise enough not to listen to his wife’s suggestion. God had promised him a son from Sarah, not Hagar. Believers ought to be cautious about proposing anything contrary or auxiliary to God’s Word.

B. Sarah’s Regret

In ancient times women were expected to bear sons and were often looked down upon for being barren. When Hagar conceived, therefore, her conception accentuated not the infertility of Abraham, but the deadness of the aging Sarah’s womb. Hagar assumed an air of superiority because she had conceived and her mistress could not.
On Sarah’s part, instead of rejoicing at the prospect of the son she wanted and planned for Abraham, she resented Hagar’s attitude and responded by blaming Abraham for what she had proposed. In her regret Sarah demanded that Abraham judge between Hagar and her.

C. Abraham’s Dilemma

The struggle Abraham underwent while he waited for God’s promises to be fulfilled and his momentary lapse of faith resulted in the birth of an unwanted child. Now his faith faced the turmoil of two women vying for claim to his promised seed.

God often tests our faith through delay. In moments of weakness, alternative plans that are not of faith often become attractive, but human efforts to assist in the fulfilling of divine promise only complicate matters. Abraham, like Adam (Genesis 3:17), followed the advice of his wife and got caught in the middle. Sarah gave vent to her feelings and dealt so harshly with Hagar that the pregnant slave ran away, heedless of the danger to her own life and that of her unborn child.

D. Intervention by God

God intervened in Hagar’s life.

1. Hagar Found by an Angel (Genesis 16:7). The angel of the Lord appeared to Hagar. The angel told her to return to Abraham and submit to her mistress, and he promised that her son would become head of a great nation. Today we know the Arab people as descendants of Ishmael. “Return” and “submit” are words that mark great turning points in the lives of Christian men and women.

2. The Angel’s Question and Admonition (Genesis 16:8-9). The angel greeted Hagar by name as “Sarah’s maid,” showing that she was known and second, that she had a place in Sarah’s household. His two questions pertained to origin and destination: “Where have you come from?” “Where are you going?” The first question alludes to the fact that Hagar was out of her place, running from duty and forsaking the blessing of Abraham’s covenant. The second question gives cause for caution because to run away from a covenant home is surely to run into sin. Hagar, if she successfully traversed the wilderness, probably would encounter idolatry in Egypt.

God’s mercy can stop us from going in the direction of sin, either by our conscience or by circumstances He arranges. The benefits of living in a blessed, godly family should never be taken lightly. As Christians we must always remember that our identity is tied to our duty. Asking where we have come from cautions us to beware of going toward sin and folly.

3. The Angel’s Pronouncement and Prophecy (Genesis 16:10-11). The angel provided a sure remedy for the dilemma in Abraham’s home. Hagar was to return and submit to her mistress, which the mistreated slave was reluctant to do. Thus God gave her a promise: she must bear Abraham’s son (Genesis 16:10-12) in his house. And though her son was not the seed promised by God, as Abraham’s son he would enjoy the benefits of the covenant blessing. This son would be called Ishmael, meaning “God hears,” for Jehovah had hearkened to Hagar’s affliction. She was a slave but her son would not be; he would be a free man.

This is the first prophecy of a son becoming a great nation and yet at enmity with others. The prophecy is still being fulfilled today.
Believers should realize, just as Laban did later in dealing with Jacob, that we are often blessed because of those near us who receive God’s blessing.

Transparency 1 quotes a portion of Psalm 127:3.

4. No Children Are Unwanted. Children are a heritage of the Lord (Psalm 127:3); none are unwanted. All life belongs to God; He alone breathes the breath of life into every new individual. Life should never be destroyed from the womb. In Ishmael’s case, after the plan had become reality, Abraham and Hagar wanted their child but Sarah did not. The son whom God named and whose name meant “God hears” would depart and come under the care of Jehovah.

II. THE BIRTH OF ISHMAEL

It is evident Hagar believed and obeyed the angel of God, something she would not have learned in Egypt. The biblical announcement of Ishmael’s birth makes no mention of Sarah, who had instigated the entire process so she could adopt the child as her own. It merely says, “Hagar bare Abram a son: and Abram called his son’s name . . . Ishmael” (Genesis 16:15).

“Ishmael” is a compound Hebrew name bearing the name El for God. Each time Hagar called her son’s name she would remember God’s merciful act on her behalf. Each time the boy heard his name called he would be reminded that he was an object of God’s grace.

III. DYSFUNCTION IN ABRAHAM’S HOUSE

Dysfunction is a term used to describe a system that does not operate as intended or expected. It is often applied to relationships among people and especially to families when the biblical roles of husband, wife, or parents are neglected or distorted. God ordained the family (Genesis 2:22-25) and gave specific instructions for husband-wife duties, especially in parenting (Deuteronomy 6:7-10). The dysfunction in Abraham’s home had much to do with the conflict between the gentle nature of his temperament and the more assertive personality of Sarah.

A. The Mocking Son

In due time, a son was born to Sarah. The birth announcement declared Isaac as the covenant son, the heir whom God had promised (Genesis 21:1-2). Fulfillment of a decades-old promise to the barren couple should have been cause for joy throughout the entire household. But the teenager Ishmael did not share the joy. As long as the tension between his mother and her mistress was unresolved, he would never welcome his half-brother. The eldest son of Abraham had another, even greater concern: the massive family inheritance was at stake.

At about three to five years of age a child was weaned and a feast prepared to mark the event. At the weaning feast for Isaac, Sarah’s joy turned to fury when she saw Ishmael, the “other woman’s son,” mocking her darling Isaac. Sarah wanted Abraham to settle not only his affections on her son, the son of promise, but also his fortune.

Ishmael enjoyed mocking Sarah’s fledgling child. Perhaps he learned his contemptuous attitude from his mother who had looked on her mistress with disdain.
Transparency 2 says that the old nature of the flesh is “enmity against God” (Romans 8:7).

With the birth of Isaac (signifying one born of the Spirit), the true nature of Ishmael (the flesh) came out. (See Galatians 5:17.) The new birth of the Spirit does not merely improve the old nature of the flesh, which is “enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God” (Romans 8:7). During the new birth an entirely new creation emerges (II Corinthians 5:17) in juxtaposition to the old nature, which strives against it.

We can learn a lesson from the behaviors of these two sons of Abraham. Not only do children notice and mimic the attitude of others, but God also notices. A child in play often acts out the attitudes of significant adults in his life. God deals with His children when what they say or do is not after the Spirit but after the flesh and contrary to His cause.

B. The Prejudicial Mother

The Bible does not indicate what Ishmael’s mockery entailed. Perhaps he used contemptuous imitation, ridicule, scorn, or sneering laughter; he may have made sport of Isaac as a father of nations. Perhaps Sarah had already seen Ishmael tormenting Isaac at every opportunity. But this time she would tolerate it no longer; this mocking son and his mother must go.

Sarah demanded that Abraham cast out this “bondwoman and her son.” Recalling the enmity between the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman (Genesis 3:15), children of the promised seed might well expect to be mocked. All who live godly in Christ Jesus can expect persecution. Ishmael, son of the flesh, son of Abraham and Hagar, continued in the family until he became a threat to Isaac, the child of promise, and a burden to Sarah.

C. The Grieving Father

Ishmael had been in Abraham’s home for fourteen years before the birth of Isaac, and was now almost grown. Abraham had once regarded Ishmael as the answer to his prayer for a Heaven-appointed heir of the promise (Genesis 17:18). He loved his son Ishmael, and Sarah’s demand to cast him out caused him much distress. It was like sentencing Ishmael and his mother to die in the wilderness hundreds of miles away from Hagar’s home in Egypt.

God did not approve of what Sarah and Abraham had done, and Ishmael, though a descendant of Abraham, could never be accepted as the heir of promise. In Paul’s allegory, he represented the flesh under bondage of law, which must be done away with in order for the spiritual man to have liberty.

D. The All-Wise God

God, who loves mercy, assuaged Abraham’s grief by instructing him to hearken to the voice of Sarah. When Abraham had listened to Sarah before, it led to sin (Genesis 16:2) and to the present crisis. This time God let him know Sarah was right. His attention was shifted away from Ishmael and firmly refocused on Isaac as the promised seed for the nation God would bring from Abraham’s loins. God had never recognized the
bondwoman as Abraham’s wife (Genesis 16:8); still, He assured Abraham that Ishmael would become a future nation because he too was Abraham’s seed.

E. Difficult Decisions

Abraham acted on his decision immediately. Just as he would one day arise early to take Isaac to the place of his sacrifice (Genesis 22:1-4), he now arose early to send Hagar and the lad away into the wilderness of Beersheba. The implied meager provision of “bread and a bottle of water” in the text is unlike the generous nature of Abraham, who in later years gave gifts to the sons of his concubines (Genesis 25:6) when he sent them away from Isaac. It is hardly in keeping with a father’s love to send a son and his mother on a wilderness journey without needed resources.

1. Provisions Exhausted (Genesis 21:15). Undoubtedly Abraham intended that the bottle of water he provided would enable them to reach the next well or oasis where it could be replenished. They apparently became lost and wandered until the water was gone and thirst began to tax their strength. Dehydration of the body initiates a vehement desire for drink, and the hot barren wilderness was a sure and painful killer. Years later Israel chided Moses, “Wherefore is it that thou hast brought us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our cattle with thirst?” (Exodus 17:3).

2. A Mother in Despair (Genesis 21:16). As their thirst intensified Hagar realized the seriousness of their dilemma. In her despair she led Ishmael to the shade of a meager desert bush where he fell to the ground, exhausted and dangerously dehydrated. Hagar could not bear to witness the final agony and death of her son, so she moved far enough away so she could not see or hear him and sat weeping.

Hagar must have forgotten God’s promise that He would make of Ishmael a great nation. She fully expected her son to die.

3. God Hears Ishmael’s Cry (Genesis 21:17; Psalm 68:5). Ishmael cried out, whether it was directed to Abraham’s God or it was mere groaning in misery, and it was enough for God to hear. As Ishmael’s name means “God hears,” so indeed God heard. His cries reached the ears of the Lord, who had compassion on him.

An angel appeared to Hagar and called to her, “What aileth thee, Hagar?” Then he encouraged her to “fear not; for God hath heard the voice of the lad where he is” (Genesis 21:17).

IV. GOD, THE ANSWER

A sure way to get the attention of God is to cry out to Him in despair. Not only should parents pray, but they should teach their children to pray at a young age and to rely on God for help and answers.

The Bible does not state that either Ishmael or his mother actually prayed to God in their distress, but they did cry out and it captured God’s attention. God’s intervention on their behalf appeared to be entirely His initiative now that Hagar no longer resided under the covenant Jehovah had made with Abraham.

An angel came with encouragement and instructions of what to do to relieve the crisis. The angel repeated to Hagar the promise made to Abraham: “I will make him a great nation” (Genesis 21:18). This reassured Hagar that God had spoken and what God declared would come to pass.
God’s promises are never empty. If Ishmael had perished of thirst the promise of being a great nation would have been meaningless. So God opened Hagar’s eyes and she saw a well of water. Perhaps shepherds had used it to water their flocks and she had not seen it because it was covered with a stone.

Transparency 3 states that God can open our eyes to wells of provision He has prepared for us.

In times when our vision is dimmed by disappointment, rejection, doubt, fear, anxiety, or broken dreams, we need to open spiritual eyes and look for the hand of God at work. God foresees our prayers as well as our future necessities. He has prepared wells of provision just beyond our range of vision ready for us the moment we cry out to Him.

Upon seeing the well, Hagar knew what to do for her boy: she filled the bottle and gave him water. God has provided all the resources we need to survive and prosper in this life, but they benefit us only after we reach out and make use of them.

Hagar held on to the promise that God would be with her son (Genesis 21:20) and would make of him a great nation (Genesis 21:13, 18). For Abraham’s sake God had destined the son to be a great nation even though his birth was the result of a sinful act of impatience. The psalmist admonished us to wait on the Lord patiently until He fulfills His promise in His own way and in His own time. (See Psalms 27:14; 37:34.)

God’s mercy and compassion can turn our mistakes into blessings when we come to Him with a penitent heart.

The Christian lifestyle is not to be driven by greed or covetousness but with contentment and appreciation for God’s provision. The Lord has promised never to leave us or forsake us. In Jesus we have all the resources needed for a victorious life of peace and joy. The “kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost” (Romans 14:17).

Internalizing the Message

In Galatians 4, Paul used the story of Sarah and the bondwoman as an allegory comparing the Spirit and the flesh. He spoke of Hagar and her offspring as being Mount Sinai where God gave the Mosaic law. Ishmael represented bondage under that law. When he spoke of Sarah, Abraham’s wife, it was as the mother of the one who is free, Isaac.

The child of the flesh in this allegory, represented by Ishmael, was unwanted. He was born by the course of nature, whereas the child Isaac that was born to Sarah was born “of promise,” and was distinguished from the other son by God Himself.

Works of the flesh are always unwanted, and they war against the spiritual life and the spiritual inheritance.

Works of the flesh are “adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings, and such like: of the which I tell you before, as I have also told you in time past, that they which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God” (Galatians 5:19-21).

In contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is “love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance: against such there is no law (Galatians 5:22-23).
“Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are the children of promise” (Galatians 4:28). The apostle taught that the lesson of Ishmael and Isaac had a direct bearing upon Christians. The churches in Galatia were composed of Gentiles. We, as Gentiles born of the spiritual seed, have been grafted into the covenant promise, and like Isaac, the child of promise, we partake of special blessings. As believers joined to Christ we are born free of the Law.

**Reflections**

- Discuss both the appropriateness and ramifications of Sarah’s suggestion that Abraham beget a son by her bondwoman, Hagar.
- Apply the story of Sarah and Hagar to the realm of faith. Discuss how the personalities of Ishmael (the flesh) and Isaac (the Spirit) were in constant conflict. Discuss Galatians 5:17.
- Sarah resented Hagar and perceived Ishmael’s existence as an unwanted mistake. Discuss possible reasons why God heeded Hagar’s and Ishmael’s cries both times they were cast out.
- Hagar and Ishmael wandered in the cruel wilderness of Beersheba, fainting with thirst in the glaring sun. After they cried out, God opened Hagar’s eyes and she saw a well of water. Discuss reasons why God waits until we cry out to Him in our distress before He opens our eyes to see the wells of provision.
- Discuss the parallel between Abraham’s emotional turmoil in sending Hagar and Ishmael away and the discussion in Galatians 4 in which Paul admonished us to cast out the bondwoman and her unwanted son.