

# GENESIS

## 21:1-34

### Genesis 21:1-34

Taught by Simeon Forder on Sunday morning, 10th December 2023 @ Deal Christian Fellowship

**Reading:** Galatians 4:21-31

### Introduction

In recent weeks we've studied several chapters that covered a matter of hours, days or months in the life of Abraham. This morning, however, as we study chapter 21 of Genesis, we'll cover 9 months in the first two verses, and then jump up to 5 years forward between verses 7 and 8. Why are these events recorded, and not others? Because these are the things that God had Moses write down for you and I. It's always good to remind ourselves of what we read in Romans 15:4, which says:

#### **Romans 15:4**

For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope.

So then, this is not a history lesson, but rather something God placed here in the Bible for us to learn from, that it might make a difference in our day to day lives, helping us look forward to all that God has *ahead* for us, as well as understanding more of what He has *already* done for us. And there's quite a bit we should take note of from this chapter.

### Overview of chapter twenty one

So let's look, then, at what this chapter records:

#### Overview of chapter twenty one

- **v1–7** — Isaac is born
- **v8-21** — Hagar and Ishmael are sent away
- **v22-34** — Abraham & Abimelech's covenant

First, we will see the birth of Isaac — the son whom God had long promised to Abraham and Sarah. But his arrival shone a light on their earlier decision to take matters into their own hands, and as the consequences of that choice unfold, we see (in verses 8-21) that Hagar and Ishmael are sent away from Abraham for good. And then, in the closing third of this chapter we once again see a character who we met last week — Abimelech, king of Gerar (and it won't be the last time we see him in the book of Genesis). And this time, we'll see Abraham set a right example in his dealings with him.

## Chapter twenty one

In verses 1 and 2 we read:

#### Genesis 21:1-2

And the LORD visited Sarah as He had said, and the LORD did for Sarah as He had spoken. For Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the set time of which God had spoken to him.

First, God had told Abraham (in chapter 17) that Sarah would have a son. And then, in chapter 18, when Sarah heard God say to Abraham that she would have a son, she laughed. But God responded with that rhetorical question; "Is anything too hard for the LORD?". And now, here, we have the clearest of answers, for God had done what He said He would do. Indeed, nothing, absolutely nothing, is too hard for the Lord. And I'll say it again; *our God is so big, so strong and so mighty, there's nothing that He cannot do.*

But we should also take note that even when God explicitly promises He will do something, He may not do it right away. It will always be in His timing, not ours. Why? Because God is good. First, in the waiting, we learn to trust Him. And when we do that, we grow closer to Him, rather than the things we ask of Him. Second, God's timing will often reveal that He had something better for us than what we first asked for. And third, it gives us confidence that all that God has promised to those who love Him (that has yet to come), will indeed still come.

But furthermore, when it comes to God's salvation, what some perceive as failure or delay by God, is actually God's mercy and grace at work, allowing many more to come to Him. We read in 2 Peter:

## 2 Peter 3:1-9

Beloved, I now write to you this second epistle (in both of which I stir up your pure minds by way of reminder), that you may be mindful of the words which were spoken before by the holy prophets, and of the commandment of us, the apostles of the Lord and Savior, knowing this first: that scoffers will come in the last days, walking according to their own lusts, and saying, "Where is the promise of His coming? For since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation." For this they wilfully forget: that by the word of God the heavens were of old, and the earth standing out of water and in the water, by which the world that then existed perished, being flooded with water. But the heavens and the earth which are now preserved by the same word, are reserved for fire until the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men. But, beloved, do not forget this one thing, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.

So don't mistake God's timing for procrastination or punishment on His part. God will do all that He has said He will do. And He'll do it in His timing, because He is good, He is just, He is Holy. And because He loves you.

Here in Genesis, we are now introduced to Isaac — who the Bible calls the son of promise. And while it will be a few more chapters before the focus switches to *his* life, rather than *Abraham's*, there are some things we should start watching out for from this point on, for Isaac is a type or model of Christ. That means, there are many things about his life, that point to Jesus.

Another way of putting it, if I showed you a model of a Ferrari - you'd see what the real thing was like, even though it wasn't the real thing. It would be enough to give you an idea. And that's what will go on here in the details that Moses specifically records. In fact, we'll see at least 9 ways in which Isaac will point to Jesus:

1. Both Isaac and Jesus' births were promised.
2. There was a long time between the promise of their birth, and it taking place.
3. The announcement of their births seemed impossible to Sarah and Mary, respectively.
4. Both Isaac and Jesus were named before their births.
5. Both births took place at God's appointed time.
6. And both births were miraculous.
7. Isaac was a joy to Abraham, Jesus was a joy to His heavenly Father.
8. Both sons were obedient to their father's, even to the point of death.
9. And as Isaac came from Abraham who considered his body dead, so Jesus rose from the dead.

What an incredible parallel between the two! May indeed our lives point to Jesus this much.

Now, reading on in verse 3:

## Genesis 21:3-4

And Abraham called the name of his son who was born to him—whom Sarah bore to him—Isaac. Then Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him.

So, now we see Abraham following God's instructions to the letter – both in naming his son Isaac, but also circumcising him on the 8th day (again, God knowing best that this was when vitamin K, which helps blood clotting, is at it's peak). And in naming him Isaac, meaning laughter, we're reminded what a miracle this was — for Abraham was 100 years old, and Sarah 90. We read:

#### **Genesis 21:5-7**

Now Abraham was one hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. And Sarah said, "God has made me laugh, and all who hear will laugh with me." She also said, "Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? For I have borne him a son in his old age."

No doubt no-one around them would have predicted what God would do. And they may have laughed at the suggestion, just as Sarah did. But none of that changed what God was going to do, or had now done. Likewise it makes no difference to what will *actually* happen, if those around us — be it friends, family or colleagues — laugh at what God says He will yet do.

And we have a great reminder in 1 Thessalonians, where Paul writes:

#### **1 Thessalonians 5:23-24**

Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful, who also will do it.

There's nothing our God cannot do. And there's nothing He has already promised that He won't do.

Here, in the life of *Abraham*, we now jump several years forward to when Isaac was 5. And we read:

#### **Genesis 21:8**

So the child grew and was weaned. And Abraham made a great feast on the same day that Isaac was weaned.

Finnis Dake notes that weaning feasts were customary — marking that moment when a child has fully moved from milk to solid food. And this is very human, right? I mean, I get excited when my son enjoys the food that I do... and I look forward to enjoying a burger with him as he gets older. But a better comparison is what we read in Hebrews regarding our spiritual food:

#### **Hebrews 5:12-14**

For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.

This is actually a rebuke to those reading this letter, for Paul is calling out their lack of Christian maturity. And it should call out any immaturity in our Christian walk. You see, we *should* be comforted by John 3:16, and Psalm 23. We should be encouraged by Romans 8:28, and Jeremiah 29:11 — but if we're not reading the rest of our Bible's, then we are not maturing onto solid food.

Now, if you've been a Christian for a short time — don't beat yourself up. You need foundational things. But if you've been a Christian for years upon years, and you're not growing deeper in your walk with God (or even interested in doing so), then something is *very* wrong. Don't get me wrong — this isn't to say you should be a theologian by now, but rather by now you should be so well attuned to what the Bible says that you can tell what is evil, and what is not. And that furthermore, you can instruct your children, you can encourage your friends, and even rebuke your church family (in love) where necessary. That kind of maturity is what should make other Christians smile. And if you're a parent, it should make you smile as you see your children move from asking why Jesus died for us, to saying "hey dad, look what I found in the Bible - this is so exciting".

The Bible draws this parallel for a reason — for it is so practical, so applicable to us all.

Back here in verse 8, Abraham is excited to throw this feast to celebrate that his son is growing up. But as we read on we see the party turns sour...

#### **Genesis 21:9**

And Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, scoffing

That word scoffing is translated in the KJV as *mocking*. And it means to laugh, mock, to jest. It's easy to get the idea here that Ishmael was laughing at Isaac. Why? Perhaps he was ridiculing him for finally weaning at age 5. But whatever the reason, he certainly did it with vigour, for Paul describes this as a type of persecution (as we read in Galatians chapter 4 earlier this morning), and as mentioned a number weeks ago (when we studied Genesis chapter 15) we also find this begins the 400 years of affliction at the hand of the Egyptians that God foretold, culminating in the Exodus from Egypt where Isaac's descendants would one day move.

But furthermore, this is symbolic of the world vs the flesh. And in that regard, you and I will experience the same thing. The world around us will laugh at us and taunt us — suggesting we compromise a little here and there, whether to get more money, or have (in their eyes) more fun, or to find a husband or wife. And our own flesh will nudge and dig at us in this regard too, saying "why don't you just do this... no one will notice, God doesn't mind". But we are to deal with that as decisively as what follows next. For we read Sarah's response:

#### **Genesis 21:10**

Therefore she said to Abraham, "Cast out this bondwoman and her son; for the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son, namely with Isaac."

And I'm sure any mother here can relate to some extent. It's not that father's don't care about their children, but there is a special sacrificial bond between a mother and her child. And dads, I'm sure you see this, for it's one of the greatest blessings to see how your wife loves and nurture your child. But as your child grows, and heads out to school, college, university and work, that easily becomes "mess with my child, and you mess with me!". There's a loving protection, a maternal instinct, that kicks in. But that instinct can kick other people too, and indeed we could look at this and think Sarah is being harsh or overacting. But she's also stating facts, for God had already said that Isaac — the son of promise — would be Abraham's heir, and not Ishmael. And so the one thing she is really asking of Abraham is to throw them both out of the family tent. This passage continues:

### Genesis 21:11

And the matter was very displeasing in Abraham's sight because of his son.

And that's to put it mildly. The KJV translates the word *yara* as grievous, here the NKJV as displeasing. But the detail behind this word is the idea of being broken up. And we can only imagine how distressing this was for Abraham. However, the reality of this situation is that Abraham, and Sarah, were reaping what they had sown when they took matters into their own hands.

Previously, we'd seen Abraham plead with God to bless his mess, saying in chapter 17 *"Oh, that Ishmael might live before You!"* — but God made clear then He could *not* bless his disobedience. And now, we see a parallel in how Abraham would have to part ways with all he had accomplished, and even what he was doing in his own strength. It wasn't a popular idea with Abraham, and it's not a popular message today, for people react to this saying *"You mean, to walk with God I'm going to have to give up things?!"* Well, yes! You cannot serve two masters. As someone well said, salvation is free but discipleship is costly.

And this was a lesson the rich young ruler learned in Matthew 19, who, after being told to go and sell what he had (and give it to the poor), went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.

JC Ryle, one of the great preachers of the 1800s, didn't hold back on this. He said:

*It costs something to be a true Christian. Let that never be forgotten. To be a mere nominal Christian, and go to church, is cheap and easy work. But to hear Christ's voice, follow Christ, believe in Christ, and confess Christ, requires much self-denial.*

**JC Ryle**

While AW Tozer, a great man of God who lived in the 1900s, noted this:

*To obey when it costs us nothing & refuse when the results are costly is to convict ourselves of moral trifling & gross insincerity.*

**AW Tozer**

Here, Abraham was faced with a harsh reality, that there had to be a separation, for we read on:

### Genesis 21:12

But God said to Abraham, "Do not let it be displeasing in your sight because of the lad or because of your bondwoman. Whatever Sarah has said to you, listen to her voice; for in Isaac your seed shall be called.

God doesn't address Sarah, he addresses Abraham, saying *"don't be upset at having to separate yourself from your old life. Rather, do as Sarah has said, for your inheritance will pass on through the son of promise."* And likewise, we should not mourn for *our* old lives (looking back at what we're separated *from*), but look to *the* Son of promise, who in our case our inheritance is found *in* (looking toward what we are separated *unto*). This analogy is repeated in the book of Exodus as Israel looked back to their old lives in Egypt, yearning for those times, instead of remembering and rejoicing in God's salvation, looking toward all He was about to do.

Abraham was to make a clean break here from his own efforts, to trust God, following His leading. But as we continue in this passage we see God's grace, for we read:

**Genesis 21:13**

Yet I will also make a nation of the son of the bondwoman, because he is your seed."

So then, even though Ishmael was to depart, and there was to be this clean break, we see God is kind and gracious, not only to Abraham, but to Ishmael too. And this was yet another promise that God would fulfil, for we not only see Ishmael go on to have 12 sons, but indeed multitudes are then counted as his descendants, including some Arab people in the Middle-East today (with even more claiming their lineage is from him).

And now, having heard from the Lord, Abraham acts decisively:

**Genesis 21:14**

So Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water; and putting it on her shoulder, he gave it and the boy to Hagar, and sent her away. Then she departed and wandered in the Wilderness of Beersheba.

So he sends Hagar and Ishmael off, symbolic of cutting off the flesh, but also as Paul explains in that passage in Galatians chapter 4, the purpose of this was also to keep the line through the Messiah separated, showing that salvation was to be by faith in God, and not by our works (that is, by the keeping of the law).

But what of Hagar and Ishmael? Well, that's what we now read. First, noting that as Abraham sent her away, she chooses to go into the desert, which is not as crazy as it first sounds, for she, being Egyptian, would have not been as far from friendly faces as she was when she fled from Sarah back in Genesis 16, which was further north.

But evidently, she doesn't get far through *her* own efforts or what Abraham had provided. We read:

**Genesis 21:15-16**

And the water in the skin was used up, and she placed the boy under one of the shrubs. Then she went and sat down across from him at a distance of about a bowshot; for she said to herself, "Let me not see the death of the boy." So she sat opposite him, and lifted her voice and wept.

What a picture this gives, though we should note that Ishmael was around 18 or 19 years old at this point. Clearly (and understandably) Hagar is distressed, but she has also forgotten that God was the One-who-sees, such as she called Him back in chapter 16, for it seems that she wasn't calling out to God as she wept, but rather it was Ishmael who was, for we read:

**Genesis 21:17**

And God heard the voice of the lad. Then the angel of God called to Hagar out of heaven, and said to her, "What ails you, Hagar? Fear not, for God has heard the voice of the lad where he is.

In other words, "What's wrong?!" Now, God knew already, of course, but He's making the point that she should know He is the One in control. And she need not worry for herself or her son.



Indeed, in her moment of distress, God was there, and He had heard Ishmael — perhaps Abraham had used these 18 or 19 years well, teaching him about the God who could be trusted, the God who was all powerful, who made all things. And now, God reminds Hagar of the promise given to Abraham both in chapter 17 and now in this chapter, that Ishmael would have many descendants too. And since that promise was sure, as all God's promises are, then this wasn't the end for him. There was much more to come. And God says to her:

**Genesis 21:18**

Arise, lift up the lad and hold him with your hand, for I will make him a great nation."

And that, we know to have happened.

**Genesis 21:19**

Then 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.

It's not that the well wasn't there before, but she'd not seen it. But now, as she listens to God, and starts to trust Him once more, she sees far more clearly what He is doing. And God is faithful, and His promises true, for we read on:

**Genesis 21:20-21**

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

So, Hagar herself being Egyptian, takes an Egyptian wife for her son, through whom he would have 12 children, and this great nation would begin that would splinter off into many groups of people.

Now, this won't be the last time we see or hear of Ishmael, but from this point on the focus will be on Isaac, God even calling him Abraham's *only* son, with Ishmael never seeing his dad (Abraham) again, and only seeing Isaac as they bury Abraham (as recorded in chapter 25). A sad situation that only arose because of that decision of Abraham and Sarah to take matters into their own hands. A good reminder that the effects of sin will reach beyond our own lives, to the lives of others.

Now, as we enter the final third of this chapter, we come across a character called Abimelech, who was the king of Gerar, who we first met last week in chapter 20, as Abraham tried to pass off Sarah as his sister, instead of being honest that she was his wife. We read:

**Genesis 21:22**

And it came to pass at that time that Abimelech and Phichol, the commander of his army, spoke to Abraham, saying, "God is with you in all that you do.

And they will go on. But I want to pause here for a moment. For clearly (with Abraham having lived near them for at least 5 years) they recognised God's hand on Abraham's life. And that makes me wonder, is God's hand that evident in our lives? How long would it take for someone to notice? Here, they are convinced God is with Abraham. And the key for us in this is faith in God, and obedience to Him — just as Abraham, like Joseph, and many others found in the Bible. Not doing things that God cannot bless, but seeking His will, and obeying His Word.



And Abimelech and Phicol continue...

#### **Genesis 21:23**

Now therefore, swear to me by God that you will not deal falsely with me, with my offspring, or with my posterity; but that according to the kindness that I have done to you, you will do to me and to the land in which you have dwelt."

Why does Abimelech ask this? Well, he has first hand experience of Abraham withholding the truth from him, which resulted in God saying to him that he was a dead man, as recorded in chapter 20! But second, he knew Abraham was a man of God (God had even called him a prophet) and, no doubt knowing of the destruction of Sodom & Gomorrah, he knew God was not to be trifled with.

So he seeks this reassurance that he will be treated fairly, and kindly, appealing to Abraham on the basis of the kindness he had shown to Abraham when he gave much more than simply restoring Sarah to him as his wife. And Abraham responds:

#### **Genesis 21:24**

And Abraham said, "I will swear."

What Abraham does is commit to being honest. And indeed we see he never withholds the truth again to Abimelech, or indeed *anyone* that is recorded in the Bible.

What he doesn't do, is react to Abimelech's question saying "how dare you question my character!". He doesn't get upset at this request, but rather shows humility, knowing he has failed in this area before. And this reminds me of something Charles Spurgeon once said:

*If any man thinks ill of you, do not be angry with him. For you are worse than he thinks you to be.*

**Charles Spurgeon**

And that is good advice, for we have all fallen short of God's standards. And as such, we are wretches. And it's only by God's amazing grace that we can be saved. So let us not jump off the deep end when someone asks us to act with integrity.

Now here in verse, Abraham, having reacted well to the question from Abimelech, raises an issue with him regarding his servants:

#### **Genesis 21:25**

Then Abraham rebuked Abimelech because of a well of water which Abimelech's servants had seized.

So it seems Abimelech's servants are in the wrong... however, we read:

#### **Genesis 21:26**

And Abimelech said, "I do not know who has done this thing; you did not tell me, nor had I heard of it until today."

Abimelech, then, makes clear he is not aware of this issue, nor has Abraham mentioned it before. So what to do? Well, we see Abraham takes Abimelech at his word, and rather than continue complaining, seeks to establish peace between them. And shouldn't that be *our* goal in any dispute?

Here in verse 27 we read:

#### **Genesis 21:27**

So Abraham took sheep and oxen and gave them to Abimelech, and the two of them made a covenant.

So then, as mentioned when we saw God's one-sided covenant made with Abraham in Genesis 15, the custom of the day when entering into a legal agreement was to divide an animal, stand in the middle of those two pieces, and take hold of each others wrists to show they were deadly serious about keeping their side of the deal.

But having made this covenant, Abraham now goes further:

#### **Genesis 21:28-30**

And Abraham set seven ewe lambs of the flock by themselves. Then Abimelech asked Abraham, "What is the meaning of these seven ewe lambs which you have set by themselves?" And he said, "You will take these seven ewe lambs from my hand, that they may be my witness that I have dug this well.

And so Abraham gives a living reminder of the covenant they made, a witness to their agreement. And this matter is now laid to rest. In all this, we see great wisdom and maturity from Abraham — he neither acts poorly when he could have felt his integrity was being questioned, nor does he persist in complaining, when an honest answer has been given to him.

Now, finally, marking this agreement one more time, we read he names the place "well of the sevenfold oath", pointing back to those lambs he gave Abimelech:

#### **Genesis 21:31-32**

Therefore he called that place Beersheba, because the two of them swore an oath there. Thus they made a covenant at Beersheba. So Abimelech rose with Phichol, the commander of his army, and they returned to the land of the Philistines.

Abraham could have reacted quite differently in this situation. But he chose the right path, and there is a lesson for us here, that we should not overreact, but simply act, when any dispute arises. That doesn't mean we stay quiet and say nothing when something needs dealing with. But it does mean that our character in such matters must honour God.

Fortunately, we are not left without instruction in such things. For example, we read in Proverbs 15:

#### **Proverbs 15:1-5**

A soft answer turns away wrath, But a harsh word stirs up anger. The tongue of the wise uses knowledge rightly, But the mouth of fools pours forth foolishness. The eyes of the LORD are in every place, Keeping watch on the evil and the good. A wholesome tongue is a tree of life, But perverseness in it breaks the spirit. A fool despises his father's instruction, But he who receives correction is prudent.

But let us not try and do this in our own strength, but through God's Holy Spirit living in us, helping us in all that we do, that we may point to Jesus, and honour Him.

Now, in this penultimate verse, we see Abraham set *himself* a reminder of these things through planting a tree, and calling on the Lord, recognising that He knows all, and He knows best. For He is *the* everlasting God:

### Genesis 21:33-34

Then Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beersheba, and there called on the name of the LORD, the Everlasting God. And Abraham stayed in the land of the Philistines many days.

So then, we see Abraham continued to live in this land that was not his, but God had promised to him. And there was peace, for now. Though, as the years unfold there would be much wickedness here as the Philistines become the arch-enemies of Israel.

## Conclusion

This chapter's theme is really the shaping and making of a godly man. But it started a while back. Indeed, you may recall that at the start of chapter 17 we saw God say to Abraham; *"I am Almighty God; walk before Me and be blameless."* And since then Abraham had stuttered in doing this, but also shown incredible faith as he trusted God. In *this* chapter that we studied this morning, that refining process carried on, as God matured him further. But God had yet more to do in His life. And in the next chapter we'll see Abraham's biggest test of faith, in one of the most notable chapters in the Old Testament. But you'll have to wait until the middle of January for that.

In the coming weeks before then, we'll be looking at the what and why of Christmas, the promised one (that is, Jesus), the *hope* of Christmas, and then we'll look ahead to the coming year and how we'll live our lives. But let me close by bringing us back to this chapter one final time, with some questions to help us apply what we have read and studied this morning.

## Application questions

Ask yourself:

- Do you trust that God is not only able, but WILL do all He has promised?
- What do you need to cut off from your old life, as God refines *you*?
- How well do you handle disputes? Do you honour God in your response?

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