

Genesis 21, The Beginning of Hope in the Promises of God: A Life of Abraham, Preached by Michael Gunn @ Harambee Church on April 6th, 2008

Intro

Today's passage, especially these first ten verses are quite interesting. They regard blessing and joy. What is joy, what is blessing? Our church culture today spends much of its time fabricating joy, and chasing blessings that are fabricated, temporal and ultimately meaningless. There is one popular TV preacher (Identity withheld) that wrote, "*God is a partner who exists primarily to make sure we're happy.*" It isn't just a false gospel that can write this stuff, it is ultimately a joy robbing statement. If God exists for us, we can pity this world, because there is nothing greater than the things we can fabricate. There is nothing, or no one to worship, but ourselves, which is ultimately what aberrant theology does; move our eyes from Him, to ourselves!

Today our passage shows us that it is God who changes our mourning into laughter, and that laughter is ultimately rooted in Him, and His work in Christ, and not our own fabrications.

From the Head...

In our passage today, God "Visits" Sarah for the first time. Here you have a similar feel of God's visit to Mary years later. Both conceptions appear miraculous, and both times, God is obviously at the center of it. Note the phrase "The Lord did to Sarah as He had promised." From the start, anything significant spiritually is "Done" by God. We can't fabricate our salvation, or even our growth. We are slaves to God, and His promises.

What follows is an interesting contrast, and subsequently 2 vignettes that relate to blessing. Sarah states "God has made laughter for me," emphasizing her joy at the birth of Isaac, the promised son. Her "Laughter" represents her joy because God had lifted her "Reproach." And provided a son for her. Isaac represents the fulfillment of God's promise, which gives Sarah joy (See **Psalm 126; Isaiah 54:1; Jeremiah 31:13; Psalm 30:11**). The problem is the birth of Isaac, is not the ultimate reason for Sarah's joy, or our own joy, but what Isaac represents. Sarah (A lot like Israel, and many people in our churches today) looked to physical blessings to bring them joy, whereas the real blessing came from the "Seed" of Abraham (And subsequently Isaac, Jacob...Jesus. See **Galatians 3:8-14**). Sarah badly wanted to have the condition of her womb changed, but failed to understand the condition of her soul¹. This would have been in line with her pagan roots, and her understanding of the nature of God. God exists for you, and he/she can be manipulated for selfish reasons. Sarah was the architect of the cultural "Hooking up" between Abraham and Ishmael (In which Hagar was the result). It was a manipulation of the promise to "make it happen." It's a controlling device that we often utilize to create joy. As one writer put it, "*Isaac is a gift to be explained in no other way than as wonder. Ishmael is a child gotten by skillful determination and planning.*" There is nothing about our salvation or subsequent joy that is the result of our own skill, planning, intellect or spiritual wisdom (See **John 1:13; Romans 9:16-17**). We can't fabricate joy. It comes from seeing Jesus as all we need (**Philippians 1:20**). I believe that this is the reason why chapter 22 shows God asking Abraham to relinquish this source of joy, in order to get him to realize that the promise, and subsequent blessing is the result of God's work, and not our own means.

The story takes an interesting twist, since Abraham throws a party for his new son, but the older child mocks the joy of Sarah, and Sarah is upset and asks Abraham to get rid of Ishmael and Hagar. By rights, Ishmael would be the heir to Abraham's line, and blessing since he is the "First-Born" child, but the promise was made through Isaac (**Genesis 17:19**) not Ishmael. There seems to be little doubt that Ishmael's mocking laughter was the result of jealousy. He had been their son for 14 years, and he was the heir to the estate and subsequent blessing of Abraham, why should they celebrate Isaac's birth? This is reminiscent of the parable of the Prodigal Sons (**Luke 15**), which show another older son upset with his father for not blessing him with a fatted calf. In both incidents, the sons did not realize that they are blessed because of God and His sovereignty, and not because of their physical or cultural position. Even Isaac is "Chosen" by God over Ishmael, just like God chose Jacob over Esau (See **Romans 9**). If it were not for the sovereign choice of God (And His subsequent work on the cross to secure it), we would be stuck in our sins, condemned forever.

However, in spite of God's sovereign choice of Isaac, we see a gracious and merciful God promising to take care of Ishmael and his mom, and make him a great nation too. All too often the Old Testament god is depicted as a vengeful, hateful entity that can't wait to destroy people. While God is not one to be mocked, and He will judge those that are deserving (All of us apart from Christ's sacrifice), He is patient, slow to anger and "Abounding in a steadfast love..." (See **Exodus 34:6-7**).

¹ I am not suggesting that Sarah was devoid of a relationship with the true God (See 1 Peter 3), but I am saying that like Abraham, it took time for this to be realized, and only fully realized at her death. This is true of us today. We struggle with wanting the things we desire in this world, and often become quite frustrated at God for not "Providing" for us.

This latter incident is an unfortunate turn of events that displays the consequences of sin, and the grace of God in one incident (Which is most often the case).

The final part of this story almost appears insignificant or out of place, unless we remember the mission that God has called Abraham to. He was called to be not only the father of a nation, but a blessing to the nations. This would inevitably come as a result of the birth, life and death (Resurrection) of Christ, but Abraham was an ambassador so to speak for a foreign God named Yahweh in a strange land. In this treaty, he is called to connect with the Philistines, build a well, plant a tree; ie. Put down roots. Begin to be the blessing. Everyone in that culture can enjoy Wells and trees. It was a true act of Harambee to build a well for the community, and plant trees for shade, fruit and aesthetic beauty. Like the exiles in Jeremiah's day, we are called to live amongst the people, and put down roots, in order to bless the people (See **Jeremiah 29:4-7**). Abraham is beginning to act as a microcosm of the blessing that God would ultimately bring in Christ's first coming, much like the way the church is called to be a microcosm of the ultimate kingdom that God inaugurated in Christ, and will be finalized in Christ's second coming (See **Revelation 21**). Unlike Abraham's bumbling ineptitude in chapter 20, when he saw Abimelech and the Philistines as "Wicked" (See **Genesis 20:11**), he now partners with him for the sake of the whole. This is a noticeable change in heart for Abraham. It's a change we could all use, for the sake of the Glory of God in this world.

...to the Heart

Our mission is empty if we aren't motivated by the love of God in our hearts. It is only when we truly understand who we are in Him (Sinful, yet loved) that we can have any effectual, sincere ministry with others. Any other motivation will create pride, self-righteousness or guilt. We can only do mission as a result of an identity that is secure in Christ, or we will do mission out of false motivations that will never glorify God, or bring us the joy that God has made available to us in Christ.

Books for further study: *Genesis*, Walter Brueggemann, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: Genesis*, Victor P. Hamilton, *Genesis*, Bruce Waltke, *The Word Biblical Commentary: Genesis*, Gordon J. Wenham, *The NIV Application Commentary: Genesis*, John H. Walton, *Creation and Blessing*, Allen P. Ross

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